



Measuring and Analysing the Variations of Program Execution Times on Multicore Platforms: Case Study

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Measuring and Analysing the Variations of Program Execution Times on Multicore Platforms: Case Study

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Measuring and Analysing the Variations of Program Execution Times on Multicore Platforms: Case Study

Abdelhafid MAZOUZ^{*}, Sid-Ahmed-Ali TOUATI[†], Denis BARTHOU[‡]

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Abstract: The recent growth in the number of processing units in today's multicore processor architectures enables multiple threads to execute simultaneously achieving better performances by exploiting thread level parallelism. With the architectural complexity of these new state of the art designs, comes a need to better understand the interactions between the operating system layers, the applications and the underlying hardware platforms. The ability to characterise and to quantify those interactions can be useful in the processes of performance evaluation and analysis, compiler optimisations and operating system job scheduling allowing to achieve better performance stability, reproducibility and predictability.

We consider in our study performances instability as variations in program execution times. While these variations are statistically insignificant for large sequential applications, we observe that parallel native OpenMP programs have less performance stability. Understanding the performance instability in current multicore architectures is even more complicated by the variety of factors and sources influencing the applications performances.

Key-words: OpenMP, Multicore, Parallelism, Performance evaluation

^{*} PRiSM, UVSQ. Abdelhafid.Mazouz@prism.uvsq.fr

[†] PRiSM, UVSQ. Sid.Touati@uvsq.fr

[‡] University of Bordeaux. Denis.Barthou@inria.fr

Mesures et analyse des variations des temps d'exécutions des programmes sur un cas d'architecture multi-cœurs

Résumé : L'accroissement des unités de calculs dans les nouvelles architectures des processeurs multicœurs permet à plusieurs processus de s'exécuter simultanément afin d'obtenir des meilleures performances en exploitant un parallélisme de tâches. Avec la croissante complexité de ce nouveau type d'architectures, il est primordial de bien comprendre les interactions qui existent entre les couches du système d'exploitation, les applications et l'architecture matérielle. L'habilité de bien caractériser et de quantifier ces interactions peut être utile dans les processus d'évaluation et d'analyse des performances, des optimisations de code appliquées par le compilateur et pour l'ordonnanceur de tâches du système d'exploitation. Une bonne compréhension de ces interactions peut conduire à une meilleure stabilité, reproductibilité et prédictibilité des performances.

Nous considérons dans notre étude que l'instabilité des performances est la variabilité dans les temps d'exécution des programmes. Bien que ces variations sont insignifiantes pour les applications séquentielles, nous avons observé que les programmes parallèles écrits avec le standard OpenMP ont moins de stabilité dans les performances. Comprendre cette instabilité dans le cadre des architectures multicœurs est rendu encore plus compliqué par la variété des facteurs et des sources influençant les performances des applications.

Mots-clés : OpenMP, multicœurs, Parallélisme, Évaluation des performances

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1 Introduction

Multi-core architectures are nowadays the state of the art in the industry of processor design for desktop and high performance computing. With this design, multiple threads can run simultaneously exploiting a thread level parallelism. Unfortunately, achieving better performances is a little bit hard work. Indeed, programmers have to deal with some issues in both software and hardware levels (thread and process scheduling, memory management, shared resources managements, energy consumption and heat dissipation of cores, etc.). Furthermore, the lack in understanding the interactions between the operating system layers, applications and the underlying hardware makes this task even more difficult. A good understanding of these interactions may be exploited in performance evaluation, compiler optimisations and in process/thread scheduling to achieve a better performance stability, reproducibility and predictability.

In this context, applications designers and performance analysts have to iteratively investigate how to achieve the best performances and checking the behaviour of their applications on that architectures. Most often, they consider the execution time as the first metric to investigate in the process of performance evaluation. The execution time is usually observed by measurements, or can be simulated or predicted with a performance model. In our study we consider direct measurements (either by hardware performance counters, or by OS timing functions calls). Contrary to emulated or virtualised programs (such as Javabyte-codes), native program binaries are executed directly on the hardware with possibly some basic OS requests (OS function calls). Our current study focuses on this family of programs: we consider the sample of SPEC 2006 and SPEC OMP2001 [1] benchmark applications. We do not consider binary virtualisation or byte-code emulation because they add software layers influencing the program performance in a more complex way: garbage collector strategies, threads organisation, caching and dynamic compilation techniques all may dramatically influence the measurements of program execution times. Direct measurements of native applications have one software layer (namely the OS) between the user code and the hardware. Unfortunately, the measurement process may also introduce errors or noise (the act of measuring perturbs the program being measured) that can affect our experimental results. For example, there is a time required to read a timer before the code to measure and store the timer after this code. Experimental setups may also introduce other factors that can lead to variation in program execution times. Some of these factors are: Interrupts, starting heap address, starting execution stack address, thread affinity, OS process scheduling policy, background process/thread, sharing of the last level of cache and environment size (that have been investigated in [2]). Thus, if we execute a program N times, we may obtain N distinct execution times.

In this document, we introduce some experiments aimed to measure, quantify and analyse the variations of program execution times on an Intel multicore machine. We report measurement results for single-threaded applications (SPEC CPU2006), as well for parallel multi-threaded applications (SPEC OMP2001). The parallel applications use the OpenMP paradigm, one of the most used in parallel programming model on shared memory computers. We show in this study that large SPEC CPU2006 applications have minor variations with the train data input. This of course does not guarantee that the variations of sequential applications would always be negligible especially for small codes (kernels). Unlike single-threaded applications, we show that the variations of execution times of OpenMP applications are really sensitive from a human user point of view.

The report is organised as follows. Section 2 introduces the experimental setup and methodology that we follow. Section 3 studies the performance variability of sequential applications (SPEC CPU 2006). The same study is conducted for parallel OpenMP applications in Sections 4 and 5. The influence of background co-running processes on the performances of OpenMP applications is studied in Section 6. Finally, Section 7 cites some related work before concluding.

Parameter	Value
Linux Kernel	X86_64 2.6.26
Linux patch	perfmon kernel 2.81
Compilers	gcc 4.1.3, gcc 4-3.2, icc 11.0, ifort 11.1
Benchmarks	SPEC CPU2006, SPEC OMP2001, micro-benchmarks
Data input	train
Micro-architecture	Intel Core2
CPU Frequency	2.33 GHz
CPU number	2
Core number	8 (2 x 4)
System Memory	4G
Cache L1	32KB Ins, 32KB Data per 1 core
Cache L2	4MB per 2 cores

Table 1: Experimental Setup

2 Experimentation

2.1 Experimental setup

We use an Intel (Dell) server with two **Clovertown** processors. Each processor has 4 cores, while each couple of cores have a shared level 2 cache. Our system has two L2 caches on each chip with 4 MB, for both instructions and data. The core frequency is 2.33 GHz. The main memory size is 4 GB RAM. The frontside bus has a clock rate of 1.33 GHz. The main features of the test machine are summarised in Table 1 and Figure 1.

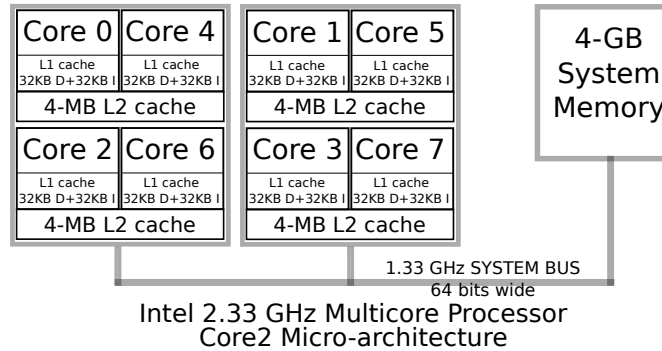


Figure 1: Dual processor architecture

2.2 Experimental methodology

In order to improve the reproducibility of the results, the experiments were done following some practices:

- The test machine was entirely dedicated during the experiments to a single user.
- Running each benchmarks 31 times [3, 4] for each software configuration. This high number of runs allows us to report statistics with a high confidence level;¹
- Unset all the shell environment variables that were inessential;
- The experiments were done on a minimally-loaded machine (disable all inessential OS services except `sshd`);

¹We showed in [5] that the observed execution times of most of the applications do not follow a Gaussian distribution. This means that some statistical tests, such as the Student t-test, cannot be conducted unless the sample size is large enough. It is commonly admitted that conducting more than 30 observations constitutes large samples [3, 4].

- Deactivation of the randomisation of the starting address of the stack (this is an option in the Linux kernel versions since 2.6.12);
- Dynamic voltage scaling (DVS) disabled;
- Using the build system and scripts of SPEC CPU2006 and OMP2001 to compile and optimise the applications, launch them, measure execution times, check validity of the results and report the performance numbers;
- The SPEC system measurement of execution times relies on the `gettimeofday` function;
- The successive executions are performed sequentially in back-to-back way;
- No more than one application was executed at a time, except when we study co-running effects.
- We use violin plot to report the program execution times of the 31 execution of each software configuration. The Violin plot is similar to box plots, except that they also show the probability density of the data at different values. The white dot in each violin gives the **median** and the thick line through the white dot gives the inter-quartile range.

2.3 Definition of program performance variability

When we observe a sample of execution times of an application P , say $\{t_1, \dots, t_n\}$ where t_i is the execution time of the i^{th} run, then we may define the variability according to many metrics. Any used metric must define the *feeling* of the end user about the instability of the execution time of the application. We can use the usual sample variance, or $\frac{|\max_i t_i - \min_i t_i|}{\bar{t}}$ where \bar{t} is the sample mean, or $\frac{|\max_i t_i - \min_i t_i|}{med(t)}$ where $med(t)$ is the sample median. In our study, we use metrics that measure the disparity between extrema observations (outliers):

1. An absolute variability, which is the difference between the maximal and the minimal observed execution times $AV(P) = |\max_i t_i - \min_i t_i|$;
2. A relative variability, which is the absolute variability divided by the maximal observed execution time $RV(P) = \frac{AV(P)}{\max_i t_i} = \frac{|\max_i t_i - \min_i t_i|}{\max_i t_i}$.

Now the question is how to decide about a definition of a program with non negligible performance variability. Since any experimental measure brings a sample variation (it is impossible in practice to observe exactly equal execution times), when can we speak about non negligible variability? In our study, we say that a program P has non negligible performance variability if its absolute variability exceeds one second ($AV(P) > 1s$) or if its relative variability exceeds 1% ($RV(P) > 1\%$). Another definition may exist; In our context we chose the previous definition in order to be close to the feeling of a user executing a program interactively (*i.e.* when he launches the program and he waits for its termination).

The next section shows that the execution times of long running sequential applications have marginal variability.

3 Variability of SPEC CPU2006 execution times

This section presents the experiments related to the variability of SPEC CPU2006 program execution times. The considered source of variability is the UNIX shell environment size, as studied in [2].

The compiler used is `gcc 4.1.3` with the flags `-O2` and `-O3`. The option `--fno-strict-aliasing` was used for `perlbench` benchmark because of a technical error in that code ².

The experimentations done on SPEC CPU2006 benchmarks test the relation between the UNIX shell environment size and the variation of programs execution times. Following the methodology explained

²The benchmark has some known aliasing issues. Hence the compilation with high optimisation level will most likely produce binaries assuming strict aliasing. The problem was reported in the SPEC CPU2006 documentation.

in [2], we conducted our measurements by varying the size of the Unix shell environment (from 0 to 4095 bytes) and running each benchmark of SPEC CPU2006 31 times with the `-O3` flag optimisation enabled of the `gcc` compiler and 31 times with the `-O2` compiler flag.

Figure 2 shows the execution times of four applications under each Unix shell environment size using violin plot. The leftmost point of the X-axis is for a Unix shell environment size of 0 bytes (the null environment); we generated the data using the `bash` shell and for each point we added 63 bytes to the environment. The width of a violin plot at y-value y is proportional to the number of times we observed y . Figure 2 says that for each UNIX shell environment size in the X-axis, the Y-axis report the 31 execution times.

From all these figures we can deduce that: 1) the size of the Unix shell environment may influence the execution times and 2) the variations of execution times are minor and negligible (less than 1%). These observations are valid for all the SPEC CPU2006 benchmarks that we experimented.

Figure 3 reports the confidence interval of the mean of these benchmarks. We can see that these intervals are sufficiently tight. These figures show that the sample mean at each Unix shell environment size does not vary in a significant way.

From the experiments presented in this section we deduce that varying the Unix shell environment size has a less impact (less than one second) on the variability of the execution times of SPEC CPU2006 benchmarks whatever the optimisation flag used (`-O2` or `-O3`).

The next section shows the performance variability of the multi-threaded SPEC OMP2001 benchmarks given a fixed experimental setup.

4 Variability of SPEC OMP2001 execution times

This section presents experiments related to the variability of program execution times in SPEC OMP2001. The targeted benchmarks are parallel programs written with the OpenMP API. The aim of these experiments is to study two things: 1) Are the parallel execution of the benchmarks with different number of threads lead to variability in program execution times ? 2) Compare the benefit of the parallel execution with different number of threads against the sequential version.

The compilers used are `gcc 4.3.2` and `icc 11.0`. For each application of SPEC OMP2001 benchmarks, we generated two compiled binary codes. The first one is generated by setting only the `-O3` compilation flag (single-threaded version). The second one (multi-threaded version), is generated by setting `-O3 -fopenmp` and `-O3 -openmp` compilation flags respectively for the `gcc` and `icc` compilers. `gcc` was not able to compile the OpenMP version of `mgrid.m` because of a bug (Bugzilla Bug 33904). The parallel execution of `gafort.m` failed because of a segmentation fault (this execution error was also reported if we use the Intel `icc` compiler). The Unix shell environment size was fixed for each software configuration. In the case of the multi-threaded version, we consider 5 configurations. Each configuration sets up the number of thread to be generated at runtime. Typically, this is achieved by setting the environment variable `OMP_NUM_THREADS` respectively to the values 1, 2, 4, 6 and 8 threads. We limited `OMP_NUM_THREADS` to 8, because our experimental machine have a maximum number of cores equal to 8. Running a parallel version of each benchmark with only one thread may be surprising, but the goal of such approach is to compare the performances of the two configurations; (sequential code with `-O3` and parallel code running with a single thread).

Figure 4 shows the violin plots of program execution times for four applications from SPEC OMP2001 benchmarks compiled using the `gcc` compiler. These applications are selected because they highlight significant performance variability. The X-axis represents the different software configurations for the application: sequential version (no threads), OMP version with 1 thread, 2 threads, 4 and 8 threads. The Y-axis represents the 31 observed execution times for each software configuration. We conclude the following observations:

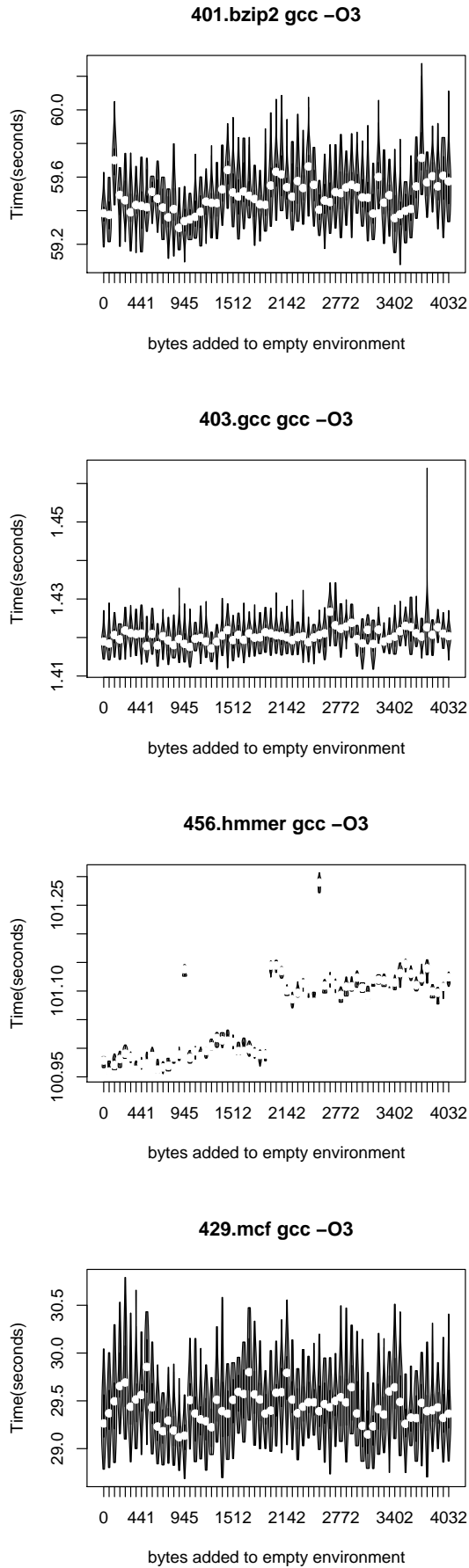


Figure 2: Observed Execution Times of some SPEC CPU 2006 Applications (compiled with gcc)

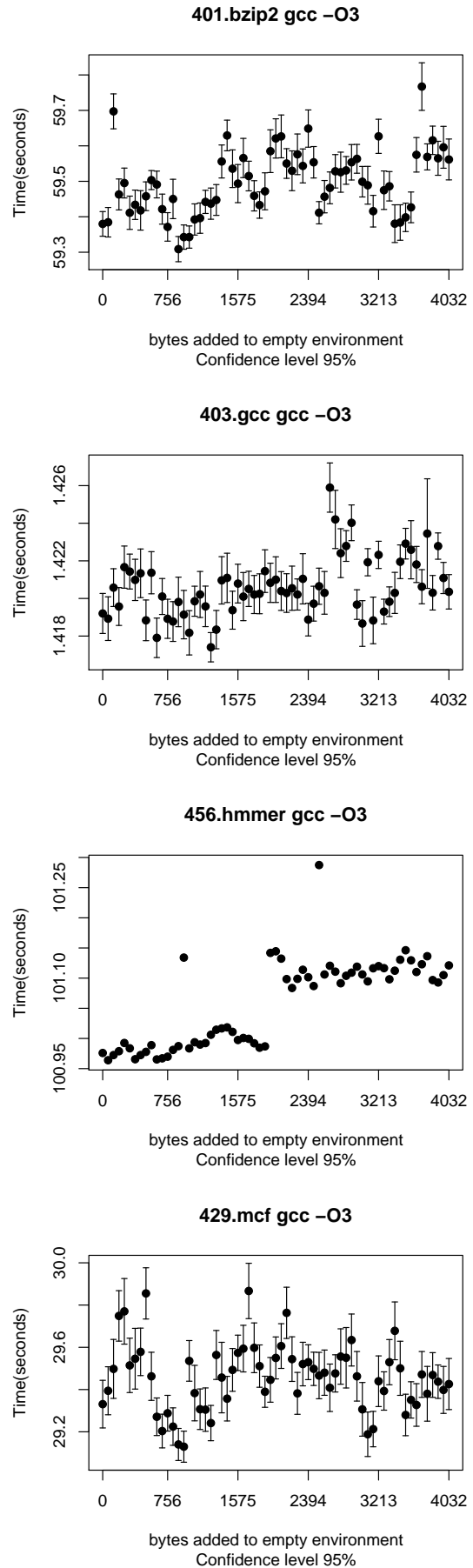


Figure 3: Mean 95% Confidence Interval of some SPEC CPU 2006 Applications (compiled with gcc)

1. The sequential and the single threaded versions do not exhibit significant variability.
2. When we use thread level parallelism (2 or more threads), the execution times decreases in overall but with a significant disparity. Consider for instance the case of `swim` in Figure 4. The version with 2 threads runs between 76 and 109 s, the version with 4 threads runs between 71 and 90 s. This variability is also present when `swim` is compiled with `icc`, see Figure 5. The example of `wupwise` in Fig. 4 is also interesting. The version with 2 threads runs between 376 and 408 s, the version with 6 threads runs between 187 and 204 s. This disparity between the distinct execution times of the same program with the same data input cannot be justified by *accidents* or experimental hazards. Applying the Shapiro-Wilk normality check on performance data we concluded that the execution times are not normally distributed, and frequently have a bias.
3. The case of the application `galgel` is also interesting. In addition to the variability of the execution times for each software configuration, we observe that the performance of the program substantially decreases when increasing the number of threads! This examples illustrates that, on a multicore architecture, increasing thread parallelism may bring severe performance loss. We checked the situation of `galgel` when we use the Intel `icc 11.0` compiler instead of `gcc`, and the situation was radically different, see Figure 5: increasing the number of threads decreases the execution times. We can observe a huge difference between the performance of the program compiled with `gcc` vs. the `icc`, either in terms of execution times and in terms of variability. We have to notice that using the `gcc-4.4.3` version of the GNU compiler has effectively reduced the execution times when we increase the number of threads (see Figure 6). This situation illustrate that the quality of the code generated by a compiler has a significant impact on performance stability.
4. The `galgel` application compiled with the `gcc` compiler, shows that speedup computation is not fair if we consider the minor execution time. We can see from the Figure 4 that the violin plots of the second (PAR (1TH)) and third (PAR(2TH)) configurations gives an interesting result on how we have to summarise the performance data of one configuration to single number. If we use the *min* function to summarise data of the two configurations, then, we can say that the third configuration is better than the second one. But if we take the *median* function to summarise these data we may conclude that the two configurations are similar. We note that the choice of which function to use to define the execution time is crucial and may lead to misleading conclusions about the real behaviour of the system.
5. Figure 7 shows that the sequential version of `ammp` is better than his parallel version when parallelisation is achieved with: 1 thread by about 25%, and 2 threads by about 15%. The case of `ammp` shows that the OpenMP API does not necessarily produce faster codes against the sequential version. The reason is that the compiler makes better optimisations when OpenMP is not enabled.
6. When the number of threads is equal to 8, then the variability is significantly reduced on the 8 cores machine.

The next section presents a study of the effect of running real applications with an affinity to the system cores taking into account the impact of sharing the last level cache (L2 cache).

5 Study of the impact of thread affinity on SPEC OMP2001 execution times

In the previous section, we have seen the relation between performances variability and the effect of co-running independant background processes. We conduct the following experiments aiming to check the impact of changing the scheduling affinity of SPEC OMP2001 threads on performances variability (studied in Section 4). When affinity is enabled, we mean that we fix the placement of the threads on the cores of the processor.

We used the `gcc 4.4.3` and `icc 11.0` compilers. For each SPEC OMP2001 application, we generated a multi-threaded version of each benchmark by setting `-O3 -fopenmp` and `-O3 -openmp` compilation flags

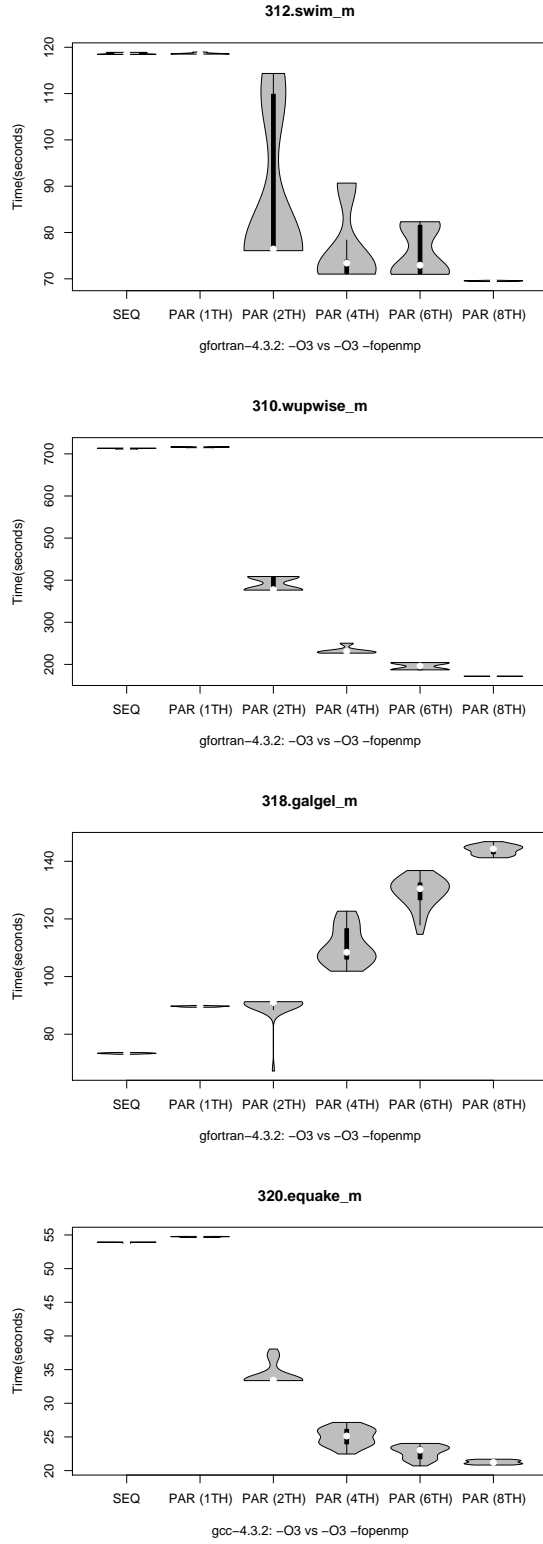


Figure 4: Observed Execution Times of some SPEC OMP 2001 Applications (compiled with gcc)

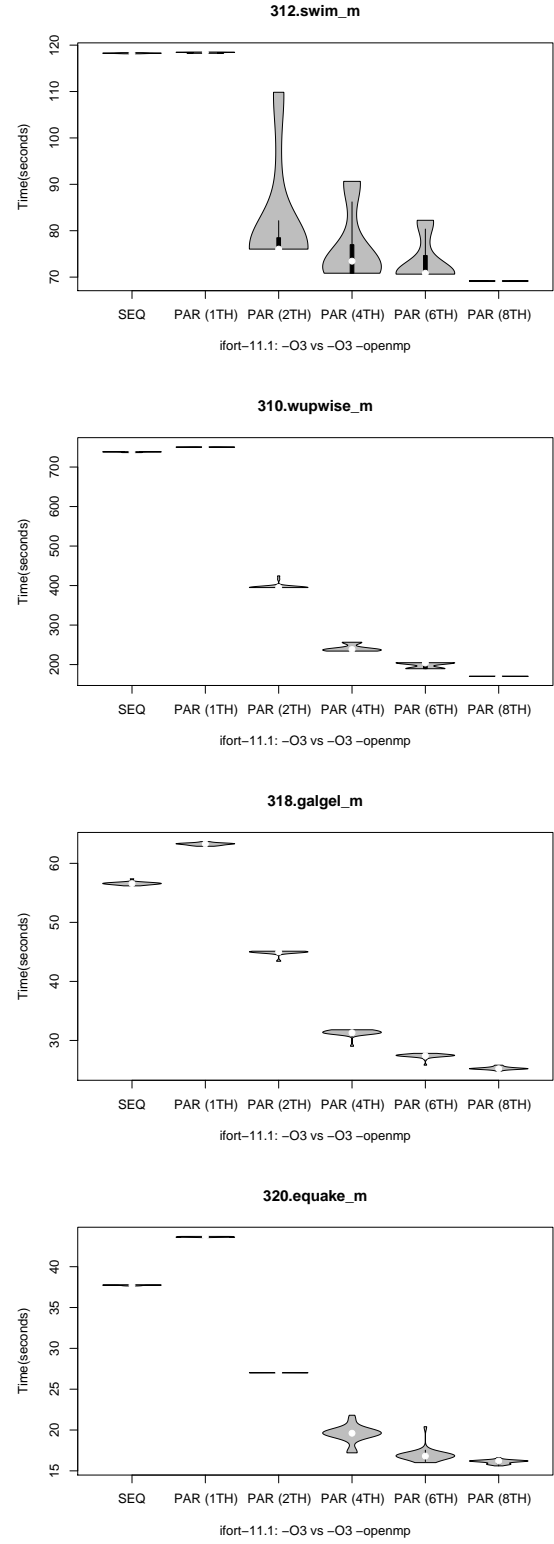
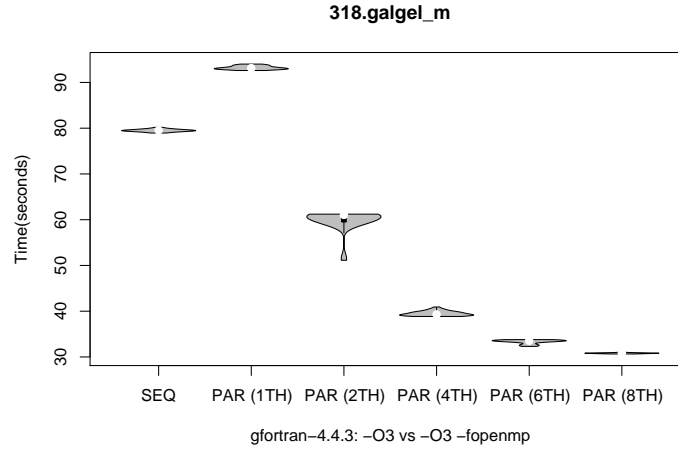
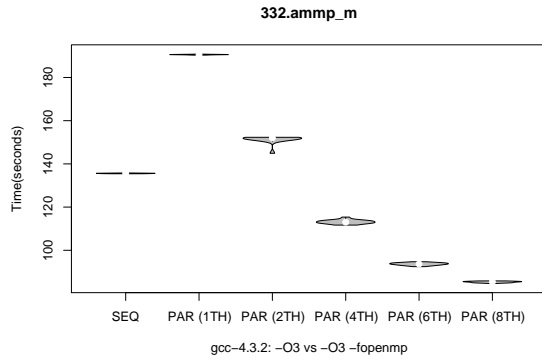
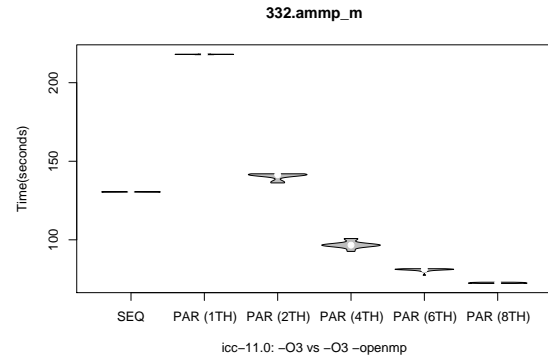


Figure 5: Observed Execution Times of some SPEC OMP 2001 Applications (compiled with icc)


 Figure 6: Observed Execution Times of the `galgel` benchmark compiled with `gcc-4.4.3`

 Figure 7: Observed Execution Times of `amm_m` benchmark (compiled with `gcc`)

 Figure 8: Observed Execution Times of `amm_m` benchmark (compiled with `icc`)

respectively for the `gcc` and `icc` compilers. We run each application with respectively 2, 4 and 6 threads under three runtime configurations :

1. Running the benchmarks without scheduling affinity (affinity disabled, threads placement let to the OS).
2. Running the benchmarks under the `icc` compiler *compact* [6] affinity strategy. Specifying *compact* as affinity assigns the OpenMP thread $n + 1$ to a free core as close as possible to the core where the OpenMP thread n was placed³. We experiment this affinity strategy because it leads to increase the L2 cache sharing between threads, even if not all the applications can take advantage from it.
3. Running the benchmarks under the `icc` compiler *scatter* [6] strategy. Specifying *scatter* affinity strategy distributes the threads as evenly as possible across the entire system. Scatter is an opposite affinity strategy compared to compact. Running applications under this strategy may be benifical to alleviate the problem of system bus contention of neighbours cores.

Figure 13 and Figure 14 show violin plots of program execution times (CPU time) for the `wupwise` and `swim` applications (from SPEC OMP2001 benchmarks) compiled with the `gcc` and `icc` compilers. In each figure, three violin plots report the execution times when the benchmarks are launched with

³For example, in a topology map, the nearer a node (group of processors) to the root, the more significance the node has when sorting the threads

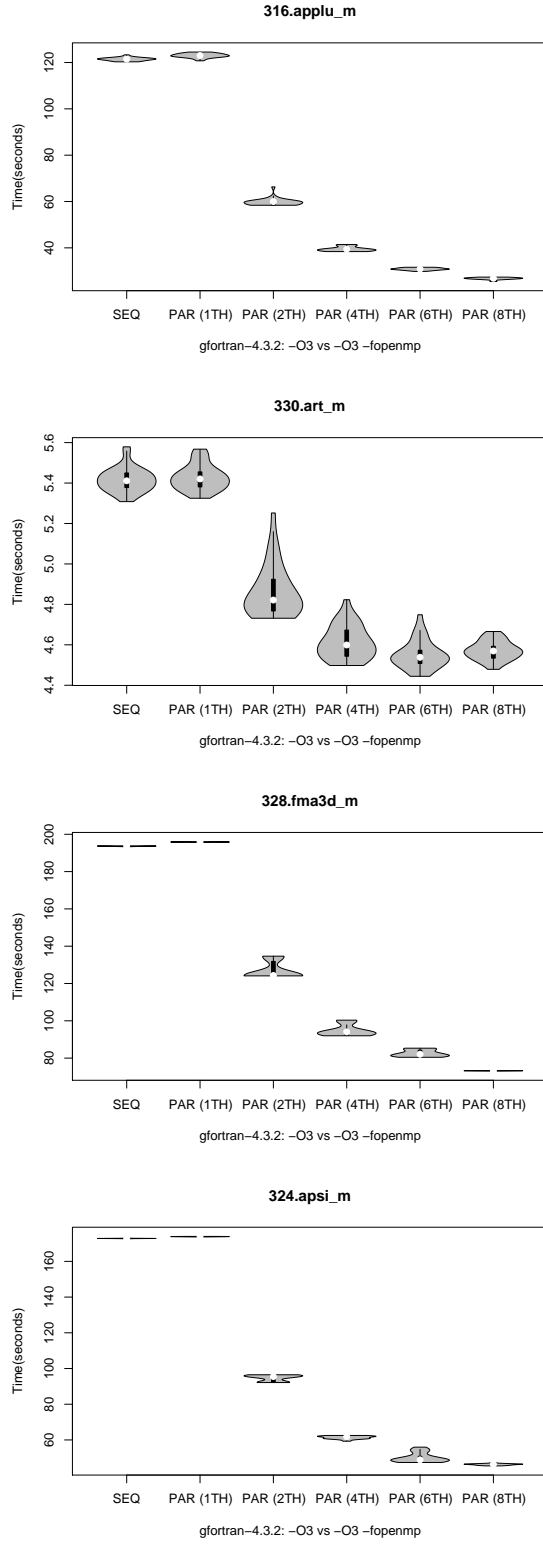


Figure 9: Observed Execution Times of some SPEC OMP2001 Applications (compiled with gcc)

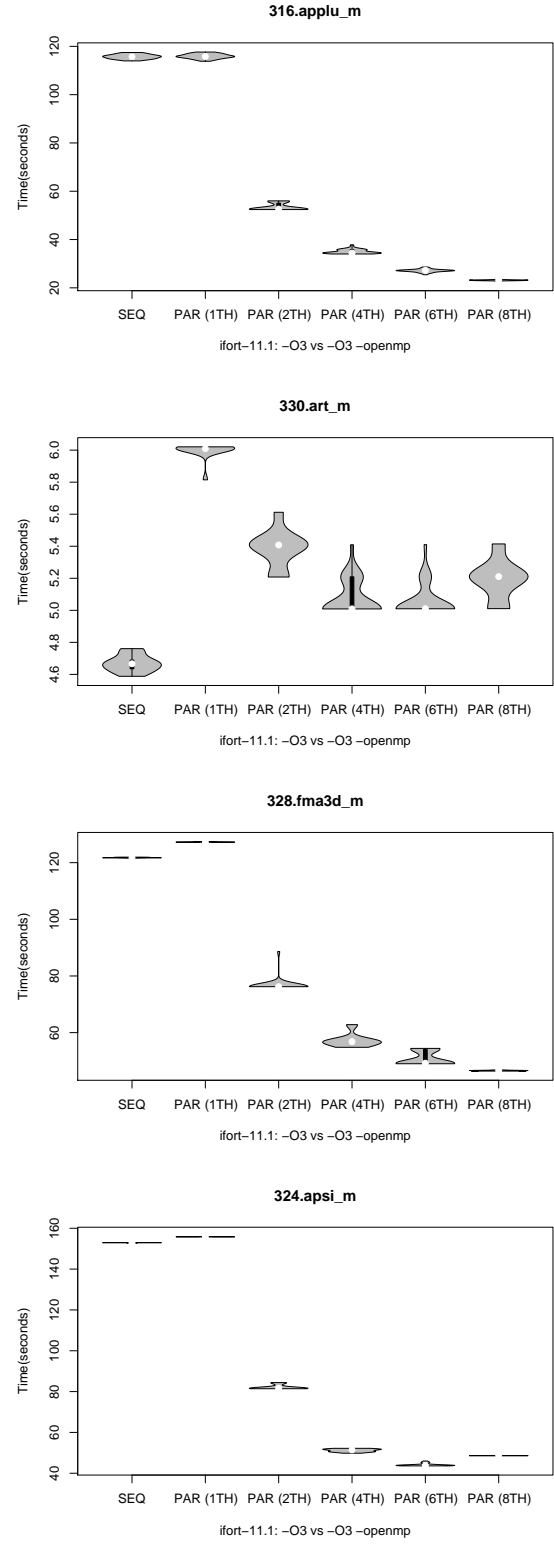


Figure 10: Observed Execution Times of some SPEC OMP2001 Applications (compiled with icc)

2, 4 and 6 threads. The X-axis represents the three affinity configurations (no fixed affinity, compact, scatter). The Y-axis represents the 31 observed execution times for each configuration. We make the following observations:

1. When the scheduling affinity is disabled, we observe a significant variability in execution times for SPEC OMP2001 benchmarks. If we consider the case of **swim** in Figure 14 compiled with **gcc**, the version with 2 threads runs between 79 and 110 s, the version with 4 threads runs between 73 and 90 s and the version with 6 threads runs between 71 and 82 s. Figure 14 shows that when the benchmark is compiled with the **icc** compiler, it exhibits a variability too.
2. The variability is insignificant in almost all the benchmarks when the scheduling affinity is enabled (the observed variability is less than 1.5%). The variability disappears either when the threads shares L2 cache (*compact* binding) or not (*scatter* binding). Figure 13 shows for the **wupwise** application compiled with **gcc** that the version with 2 threads runs ≈ 454 s when they share the L2 cache (2 threads runs on 2 cores sharing single L2 cache *compact*) and runs between 419 and 421 s when they do not share it *scatter*.
3. The **art** benchmark used with both compilers and the **apsi** with **gcc** exhibits a less sensitivity to changing scheduling affinity. We observed that even when we set up the binding feature, variability in execution times still appear (see Figures 15 and 16 where the variability exceeds 5%). In other words, fixing the affinity between the threads does not remove the performance variability of all the benchmarks.
4. We observed in 7 from the 9 tested benchmarks that they run faster when they are launched with a *scatter* strategy). The benchmarks which take benefits from L2 cache sharing *compact* are **ammp** and **galgel** with both compilers (see Figures 17 and 18).

In order to check the origin of the performance variability observed when we disable the affinity, we study the impact of thread placements (fixed by the OS) on the cache effects. For instance, we run **swim** and we report his number of last level cache misses (L2 cache misses). Figure 12 shows violin plots summarising the number of L2 cache misses when **swim** runs with 2 threads. We observe clearly that the variability of the execution times observed in Figure 11 is closely related to the number of L2 cache misses. Indeed, when we binded the threads of **swim** explicitly to the system cores, we observed insignificant variability in the execution times. But whacking system to handle the threads placement on the cores the situation was completely different and we observed an important variability. The interesting thing is that higher execution time in the configuration without affinity was accompanied with a higher L2 cache misses number. This situation shows that **swim** is sensitive to cache affinity.

When affinity is not fixed, the increase of the number of L2 cache misses does not explain the cause of the observed performance variability but just an effect. We observe that the an important factor contributing to the important performance variability is the thread migration operated by OS kernel. Indeed, we traced the mapping of threads to cores each time a new parallel region is entered. The analysis of the tracing of the mapping event allows us to see that the runs with high execution times, the application threads have suffered from a thread migration. Thus, the migration impact negatively the cache utilisation leading to a significant performance variability. However, it is possible that thread migration improves execution times: this is the case for instance when data reuse and L2 cache sharing less important.

In addition to **swim**, we observed also that the performances of **wupwise**, **applu**, **equake**, **apsi**, **fma3d**, **ammp** applications are sensitive to cache affinity too.

In this section, we clearly observe that fixing affinity between threads removes performances variability in many applications, but not all: there are still other influencing factors that make executions time to vary. By now, it is not clear if fixing affinity would improve the average or the median execution time. Sometimes, it is better to let some hazard (OS) to decide about thread binding, since it is not clear if simple strategies such as *scatter* and *compact* are efficient.

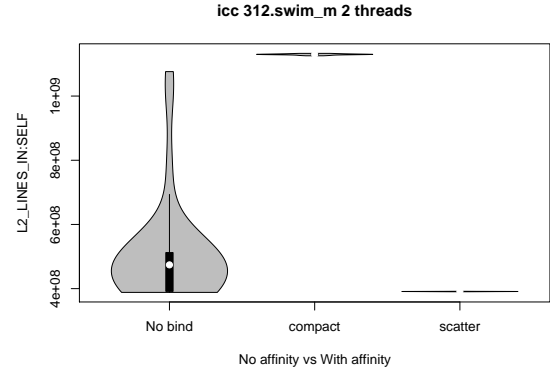
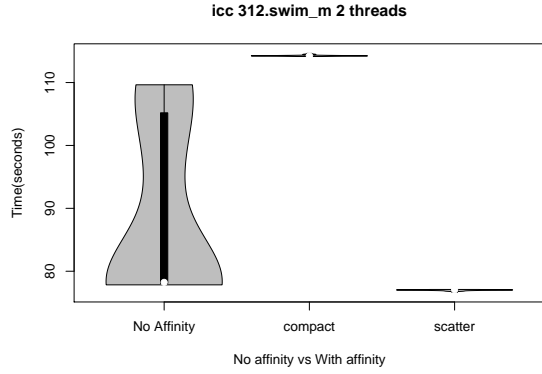


Figure 11: Observed cycles count in `swim` running with 2 threads

Figure 12: Observed L2 cache lines misses in `swim` running with 2 threads

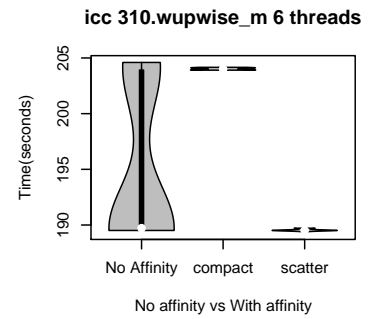
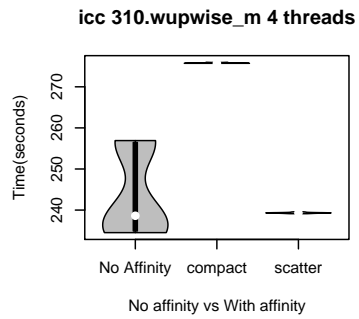
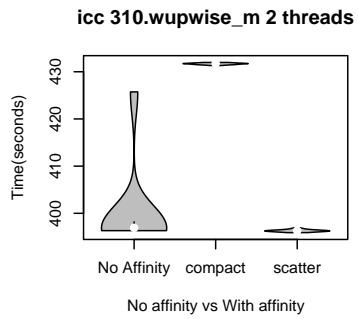
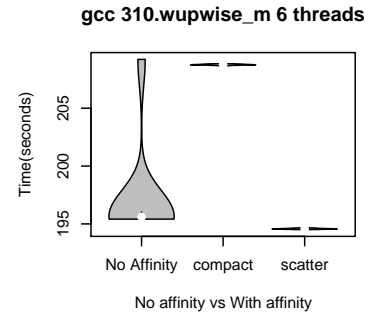
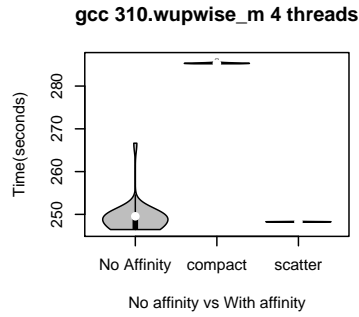
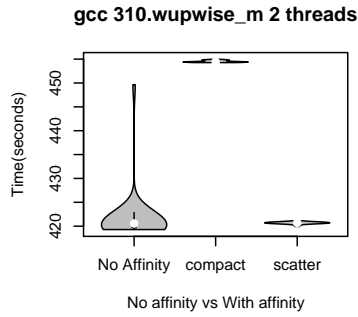


Figure 13: Observed Execution Times of the `wupwise` Application (compiled with `gcc` and `icc`)

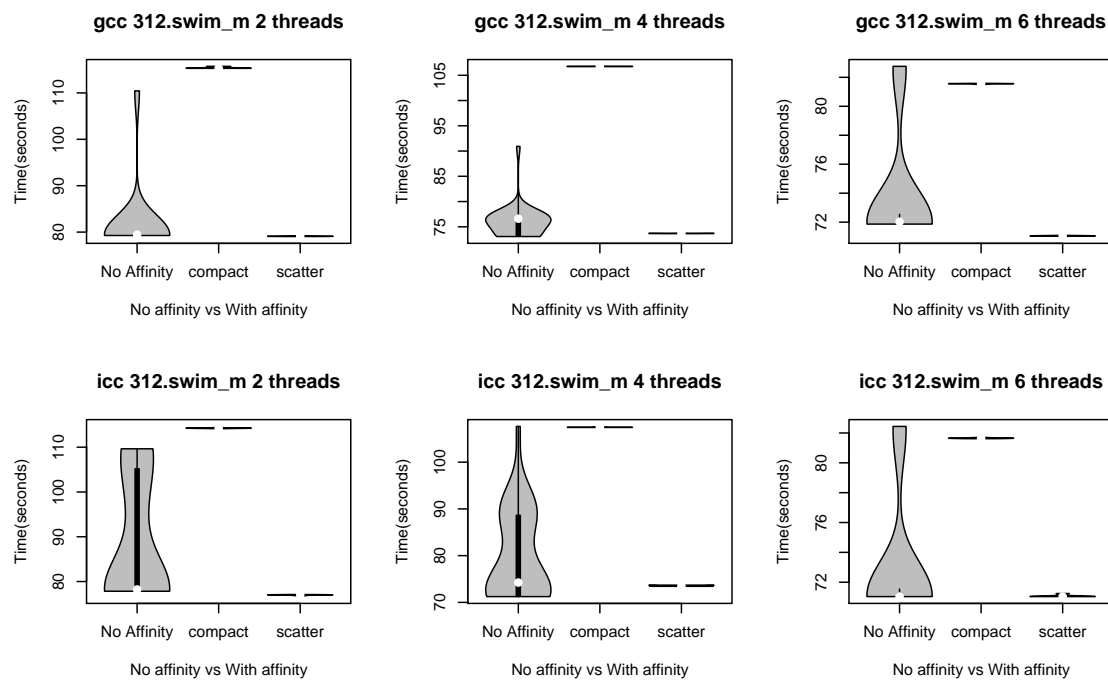


Figure 14: Observed Execution Times of the `swim` Application (compiled with `gcc` and `icc`)

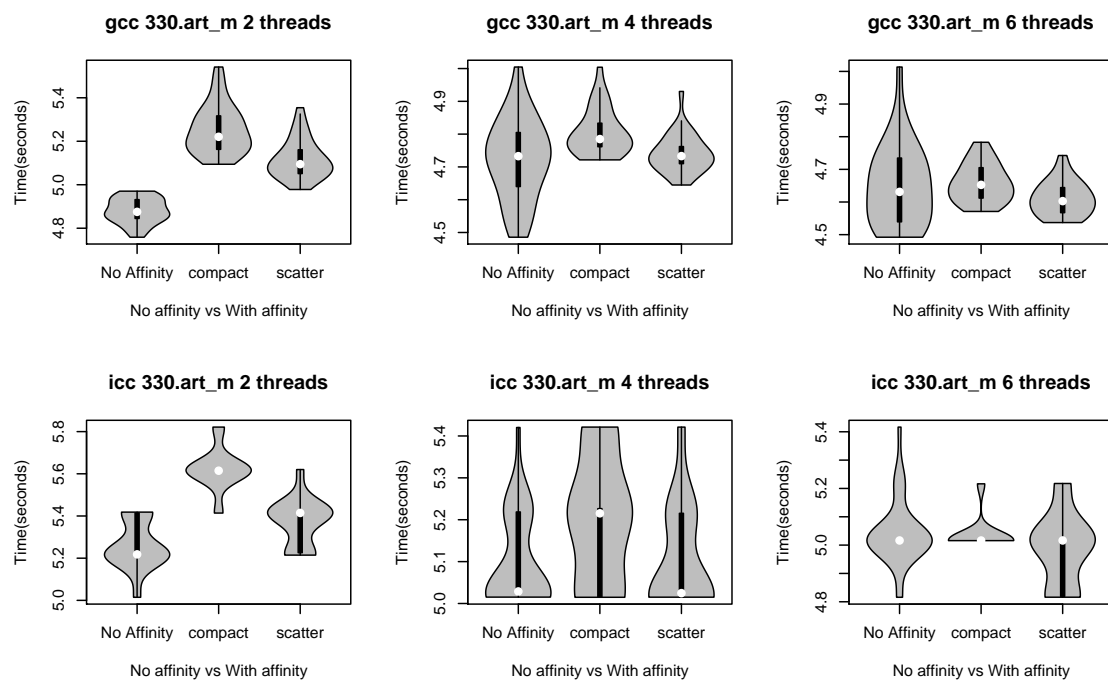
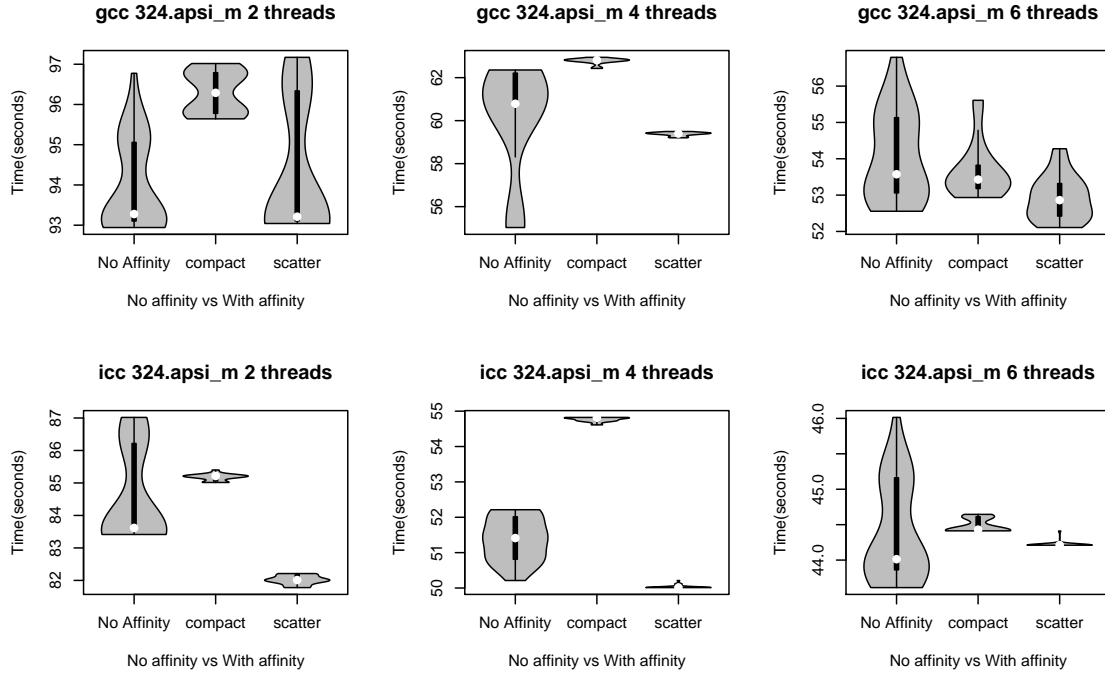
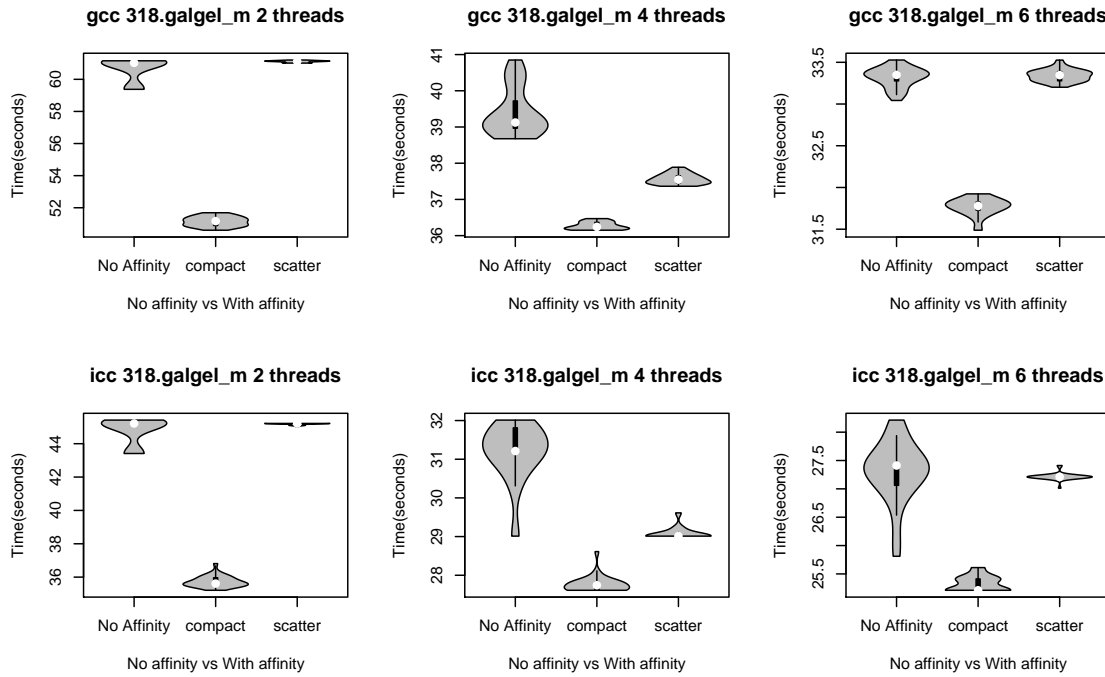


Figure 15: Observed Execution Times of the `art` Application (compiled with `gcc` and `icc`)

Figure 16: Observed Execution Times of the `apsi` Application (compiled with gcc and icc)Figure 17: Observed Execution Times of the `galgel` Application (compiled with gcc and icc)

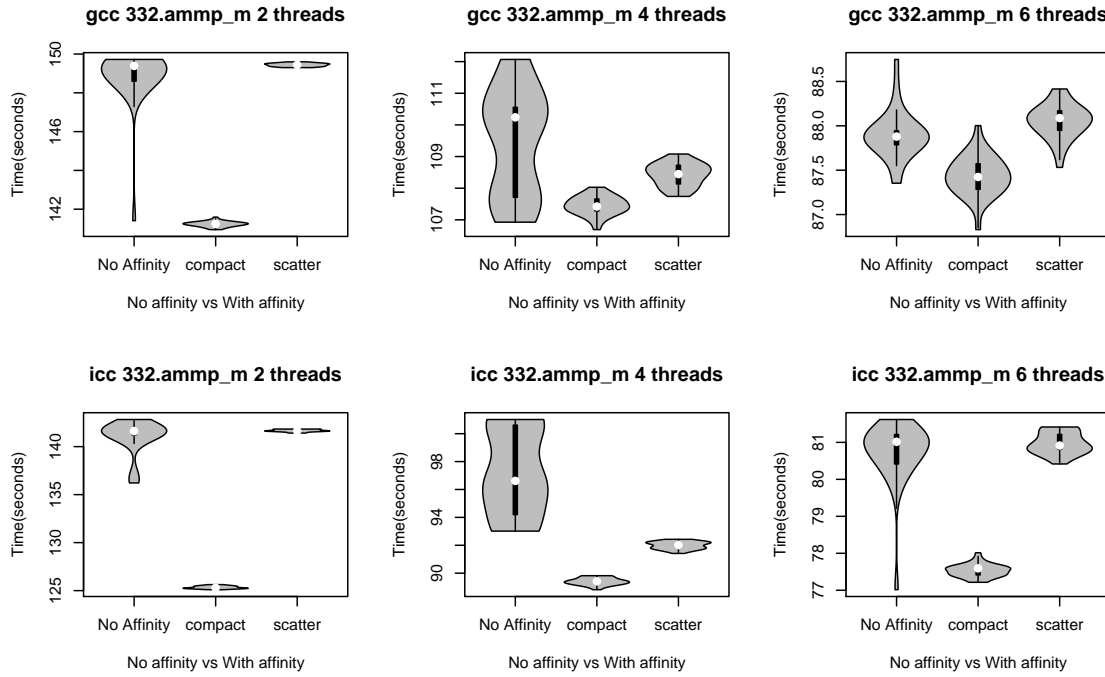


Figure 18: Observed Execution Times of the `amp` Application (compiled with `gcc` and `icc`)

6 Study of co-running processes impact on programs performance variability

This section describes experiments trying to quantify and qualify the factors influencing the variations of program execution times. One of the factors which can influence the variability of program execution times is the core resource sharing. In our study, we focus on the sharing between the OpenMP parallel programs and some artificial applications. For each OpenMP benchmark we retrieve its execution times in user mode (run level 3 : least privileged mode), system mode (run level 0 : most privileged mode) and real execution time (total elapsed execution time).

In these experiments we generate a system load by running some artificial co-running processes in background. These processes are launched by one process executing the `fork` system call a number of times equal to the number of processes that we need to generate at runtime. This number is supplied as an argument to the command line. The code executed by these co-running processes is a dummy non terminating loop without memory access. The code of the co-running processes is given by Listing 3 in page 21.

6.1 Experimental setup

- Each benchmark was compiled with the `-O3 -fopenmp` flags.
- The OpenMP program execution time measurement is only done on thread number 0 (we retrieve the execution time of the master thread because it is the one that defines the whole application execution time).
- The SPEC OMP2001 benchmarks are launched with 8 threads at runtime.
- We have five runtime configurations:

- Each SPEC OMP2001 benchmark (8 threads) is run either as a single application on the machine (minimal system load) or in parallel with 8, 16, 24 or 32 co-running processes respectively (performance perturbation created in background). This leads to five distinct runtime configurations.
- The SPEC OMP2001 and the co-running processes are launched without scheduling affinity to the system cores (no explicit binding of threads on cores).
- The number of the OpenMP threads (from applications under study) and co-running processes running on each core are respectively : 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5. For example a configuration with 5 threads or co-running process per core, consist of 1 OpenMP thread plus 4 co-running processes.

Figure 19 and Figure 20 show the violin plots of the user and real program execution times for four applications from SPEC OMP2001 benchmarks compiled using the `gcc-4.3.2` compiler. The X-axis represents the violin plots of program execution times when the SPEC OMP2001 benchmarks run together with the co-running processes. The Y-axis represents the 31 observed execution times for each software configuration.

From Figure 19, we can see that when we increase the number of processes running in background, the program execution times at user level of the OpenMP applications decreases. Meanwhile we observe in Figure 20 an increase of real execution times. Running the threads of the SPEC OMP2001 benchmarks and the co-running processes with a fixed scheduling affinity leads to the same conclusion (not plotted here): when we increase the number of co-running processes, we observe a decrease in program execution times at user level of the OpenMP applications. The following section presents measurements to check if the phenomenon presented above appears when running some basic micro-benchmarks instead of SPEC OMP2001.

6.2 Study of system load impact on micro-benchmarks execution times

We follow the same steps presented in the previous section, but this time we use some synthetic (simple codes) benchmarks which we call micro-benchmarks. These micro-benchmarks are used to isolate some micro-architectural events. All of the micro-benchmarks and the co-running processes were compiled with the compiler optimisation flag `-O3`.

6.2.1 Micro-benchmarks code

The code of the micro-benchmarks in Listing 1 (page 20) is composed of three loops `Loop1` (parallel loop), `Loop2`, `Loop3` and one statement `S1`. The `L2` loop is added for repetition purpose to increase the measurement accuracy. The data set accessed by all the micro-benchmarks is equal to $N * M * \text{sizeof}(\text{int64}) = D \text{ bytes}$ where N is the number of iterations of the outermost loop (`Loop1` loop) and M is the number of iterations of the inner most loop (`Loop3` loop). In addition, since we want to give the same workload to every thread, this leads to consider values for N which are multiple of the number of threads. Having all this constraints, the values taken by N are from 8 to 196608 and the values taken by M are from 196608 to 8. For instance, when we have 8 threads, the value of N starts at 8. Furthermore, whatever the values of N and M are, the workload assigned to each thread has a working set of size $1.5MB$. This size is chosen to be less than the half of the size of the L2 cache preventing from frequently accessing the DRAM in case of L2 cache misses.

Now we define the notion of memory *chunk*. In the context of our study the *chunk* represents the size of the vector fraction from `tab` accessed by the innermost M -loop: in the peticular code of Listing 1, we clearly see that each iteration of the M -loop accesses to a single element from `tab`, consequently *chunk size* = $M \times \text{sizeof}(\text{int64})$. Table 2 gives the couples of values of N and M that we have experimented. To every couple of values (N, M) we associate the micro-benchmark `mb_N-value_M-value`. Following this denomination, the first micro-benchmark is `mb_8.196608`, the second `mb_16.98304` and so on. With this micro-benchmark structure, we access the array `tab` in an indexed way represented by the `S1` statement. Thus, the size of the chunk accessed in the M -loop depends on the number of iterations of the `Loop1`. So, Larger values of N lead to smaller sizes of chunks. In contrary, smaller values of N lead to larger sizes of chunks.

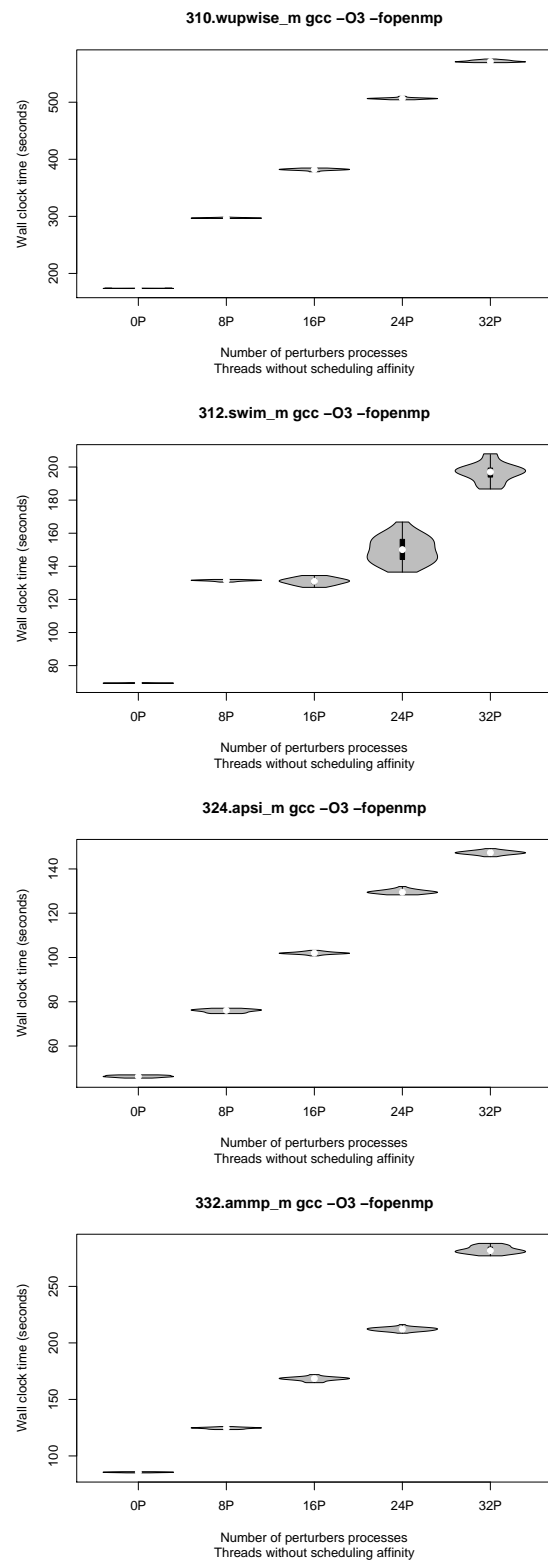
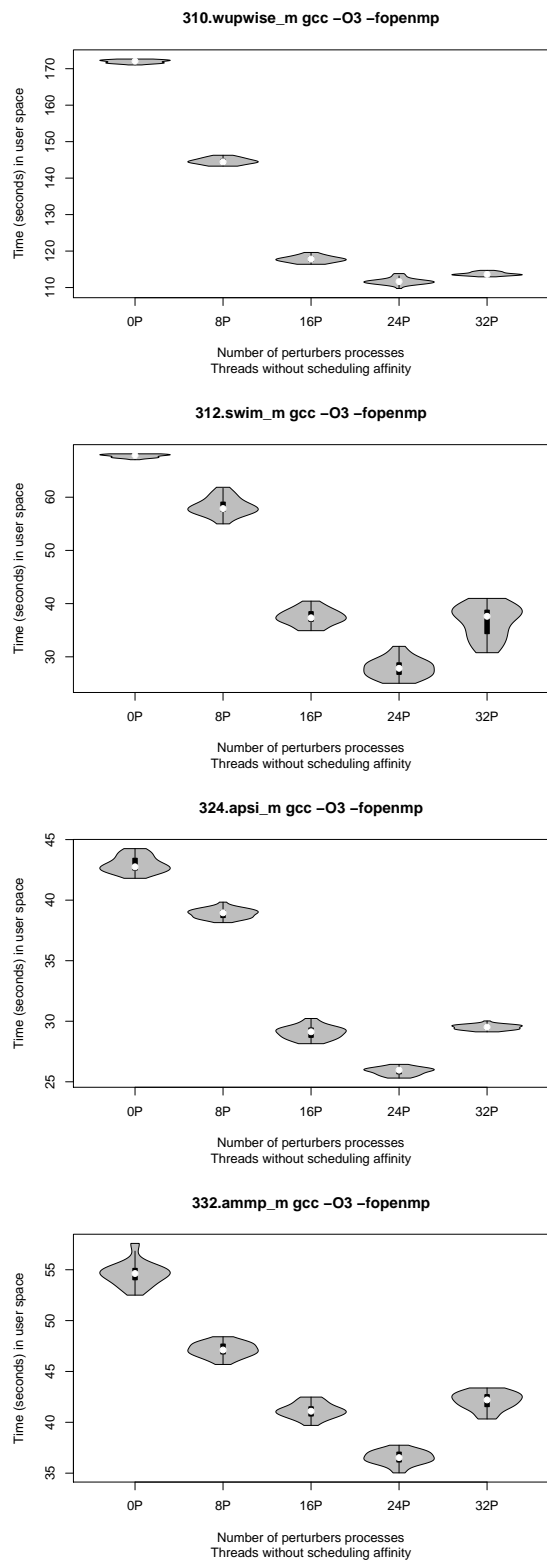


Figure 19: Observed User Execution Times of some SPEC OMP2001 Applications (compiled with gcc)

Figure 20: Observed Real Execution Times of some SPEC OMP2001 Applications (compiled with gcc)

N	M	Benchmark	Chunk size = M*sizeof(int64)	N	M	Benchmark	Chunk size = M*sizeof(int64)
8	196608	mb_8_196608	1536 KB	1536	1024	mb_1536_1024	8 KB
16	98304	mb_16_98304	768 KB	3072	512	mb_3072_512	4 KB
32	49152	mb_32_49152	384 KB	6144	256	mb_6144_256	2 KB
64	24576	mb_64_24576	192 KB	12288	128	mb_12288_128	1 KB
128	12288	mb_128_12288	96 KB	24576	64	mb_24576_64	0.5 KB
256	6144	mb_256_6144	48 KB	49152	32	mb_49152_32	0.25 KB
512	3072	mb_512_3072	24 KB	98304	16	mb_98304_16	0.125 KB
1024	1536	mb_1024_1536	12 KB	196608	8	mb_196608_8	0.0625 KB

Table 2: Values taken by N and M in the outermost and the innermost loops of th micro-benchmarks code

Listing 1: OpenMP micro-benchmarks code

```

void wastetime() {
    #pragma omp parallel for default(none) private(i,j,k) shared(tab)
    Loop1: for(i = 0 ; i < N ; i++)
    Loop2:      for(j = 0 ; j < 10000; j++)
    Loop3:      for(k = 0 ; k < M; k++)
    S1:         tab[i*M+k]++;
}

```

The first micro-benchmark `mb_8_196608` corresponds to the case where every thread executes a single outer loop iteration (Loop1 or the N-loop) and the innermost loop M-loop accesses to a chunk of size $M * \text{sizeof}(\text{int64}) = 1.5 \text{ MB}$. This chunk size is sufficient to keep data inside the L2 cache but not inside the L1 data cache. In other words, the first micro-benchmark guarantees that every thread has its data in L2 but not in L1.

The last micro-benchmark `mb_196608_8` corresponds to the case where every thread executes $N/8 = 24576$ N iterations, the innermost M-loops access to a chunk of size $M * \text{sizeof}(\text{long}) = 64 \text{ B}$ (a single cache line size). In other words, this last micro-benchmark guarantees that every thread has all its data in L1.

The other micro-benchmarks between `mb_8_196608` and `mb_196608_8` cover the range for other values of (N,M). They give us the performance of the intermediate situations when data are fully or partly in L1. We should have (in theory) all data fully inside L2 because the chunk sizes are all less than half of L2 size, but we see later that threads sharing common L2 may create cache conflicts, thus data are ejected from L2.

Listing 2 shows the code of the co-running processes executing in parallel with Listing 1. We can see that it is a simple code consisting of a dummy non terminating `while` loop. The `stress` function is called by the `main` function and it never returns unless there is an explicit user intervention by sending the Linux SIGINT signal to stop it.

Listing 2: co-running processes code

```

int stress () {
    while (1) {
        ;
    }
    return 0;
}

```

The generated assembly code after compiling the C code of the co-running processes with the `-O3` compilation flag is given in listing 3.

Listing 3: The generated assembly code of the function *stress* in the co-running process code

```
.label :
    jmp .label
```

6.2.2 Micro-benchmarks execution times under co-running processes

In this section, the micro-benchmarks are run with 8 threads. The binding of the thread is fixed as follows: thread i is fixed to be executed on core i . Since the machine has 8 cores, each thread of the micro-benchmark is devoted to a single core. On that core, other co-running processes are launched with a fixed round-robin affinity: co-running process i is scheduled to be run on core number i modulo 8.

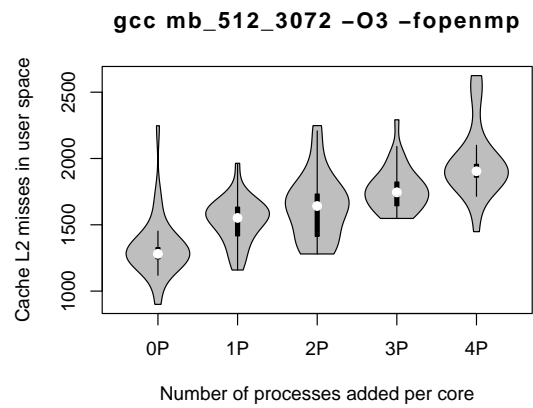
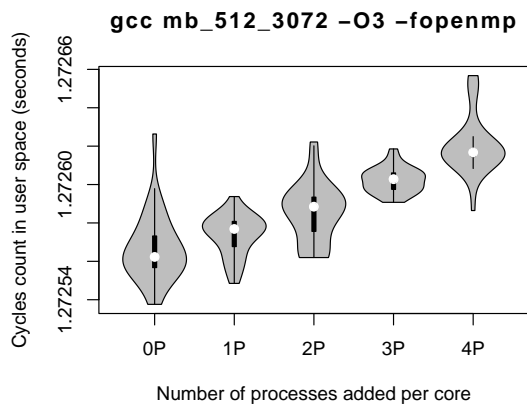
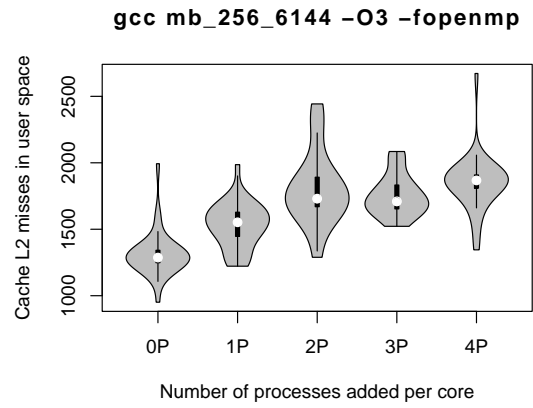
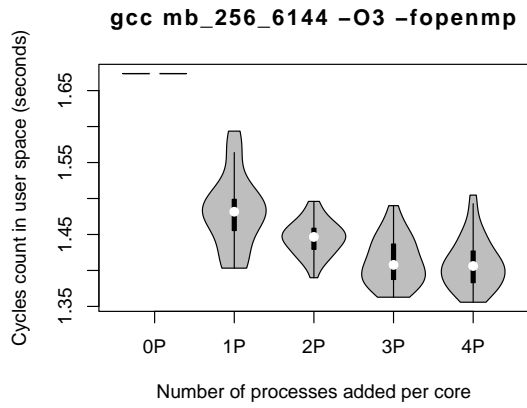
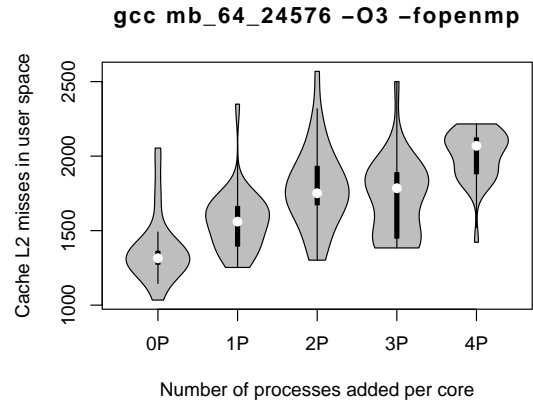
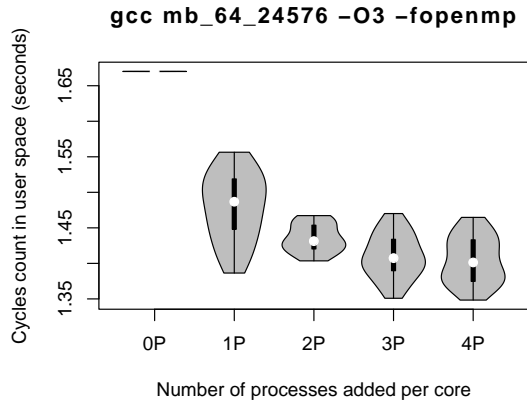
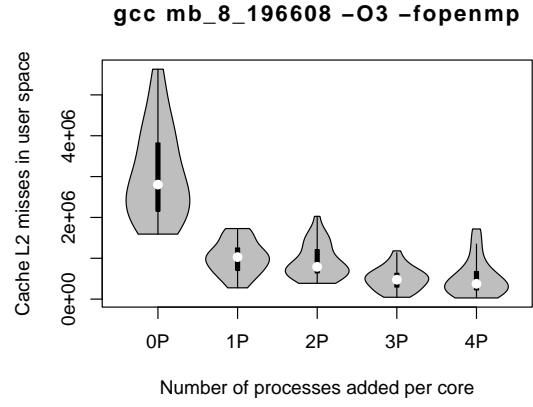
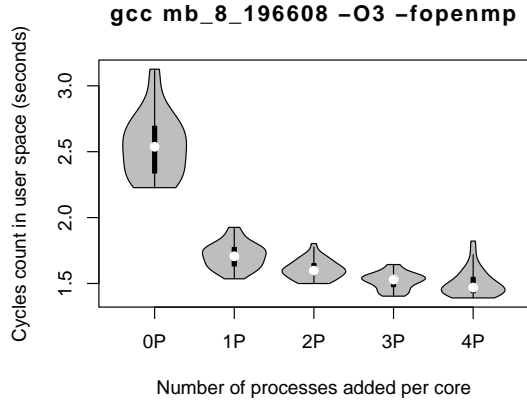
From Figure 21, we observe that when we increase the number of co-running processes per core (X-axis), a decrease holds for program execution times at user level. This observation is done with the `mb_8.196608`, `mb_64.4576` and `mb_256.6144` micro-benchmarks, but a slight increase of user level execution time is observed in the `mb_512.3072` micro-benchmark. Furthermore, we observe that all the micro-benchmarks which have a N value in the outermost loop (the i loop) greater or equal than 512 (chunk sizes less than 32KB), have a slight increase (can be neglected) in program execution times at the user level. At the other side, all the micro-benchmarks which have a N value less than 512 (chunk sizes greater than 32 KB), have a noticeable decrease of program execution time at the user level.

The common point between the micro-benchmarks where the program execution times decrease is the size of the chunk that each thread treats. Indeed, each thread from those benchmarks treats a chunk which have a size greater than 32 KB. The size of those chunks fits in the L2 cache but it does not fit in L1 data cache leading to frequently access the last level cache. In addition, the benchmarks presenting a decrease in program execution times exhibits a high number of L2 cache misses. This phenomenon does not appear in the `mb_512.3072` micro-benchmark. For each iteration of the i loop in this micro-benchmark, a 24KB data size are provided to the L1 data cache which have a 32KB size.

Another remark is that the `mb_512.3072` micro-benchmark has the least program execution time compared to the other micro-benchmarks. Even if there are some micro-benchmarks which have program execution times decrease, `mb_512.3072` still have the minimal observed execution time.

Now let try to understand the performances of Figure 21 by plotting the L2 cache miss rate in Figure 22:

1. We have 8 threads running on eight 8 and 4 L2 caches, each L2 cache is shared between two cores (see the architecture of the machine in Figure 1 in page 5). Then we have two threads running on two adjacent cores meaning that they are competing to access a shared L2 cache. The decrease of execution times was observed on micro-benchmarks which access chunks having a size greater than the size of the L1 data cache. Thus, this subset of micro-benchmarks needs a high frequency access of the L2 cache to provide the needed data by the L1 data cache leading to a high number of L1 data cache misses.
2. The high number of L2 cache misses observed can be due to the hardware prefetcher of the L2 cache. We think that the automatic hardware prefetcher evict some useful data from L2. The main effect of prior behaviour, is for each iteration of `Loop2` (the j loop), data must be reloaded to the L2 cache leading to the high number of L2 cache misses. Another explanation for the high number



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Figure 21: Observed User Execution Times of some micro-benchmarks (compiled with gcc)

Figure 22: Observed L2 cache misses of some micro-benchmarks (compiled with gcc)

of L2 cache misses is due to using small virtual memory pages. In this case several 4 KB pages are mapped to the block of L2 cache lines, resulting in conflict misses.

From the foregoing facts, we emit another hypothesis trying to explain why user-level program execution times decrease when we increase the number some co-running processes. The hypothesis is based on the influence of the thread scheduling policy (Round-Robin time sharing) on the execution times. We think that the threads running on cores sharing data in L2 will not access them simultaneously: for each couple of cores sharing an L2 cache, the scheduling of the thread may lead to situations where one core will run an OpenMP thread and the adjacent core will run the co-running process resulting in none simultaneously access to the shared L2.

Therefore, the number of L2 cache misses decreases, reducing the pressure on the shared L2 cache. Finally, this situation leads to decrease the program execution times at the user level. The following subsection presents experiments to check the relevance of our hypothesis.

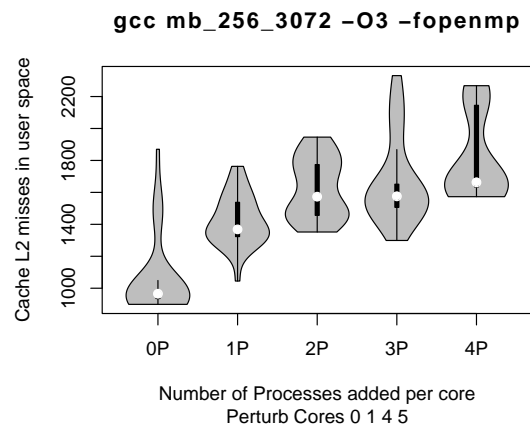
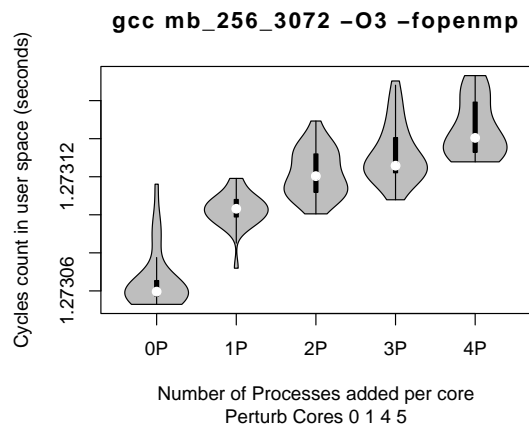
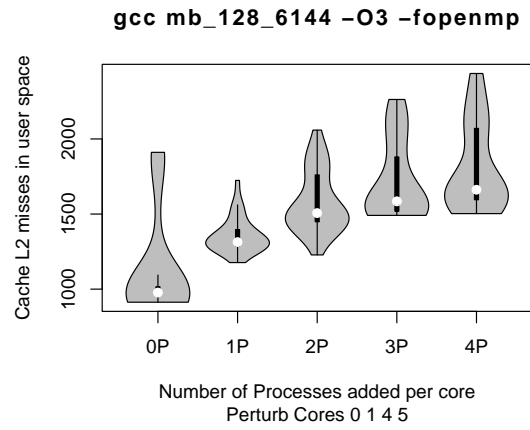
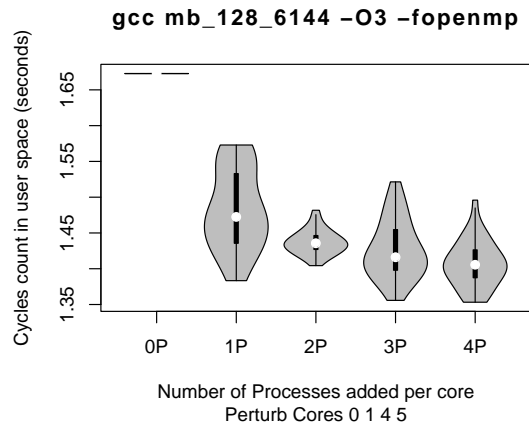
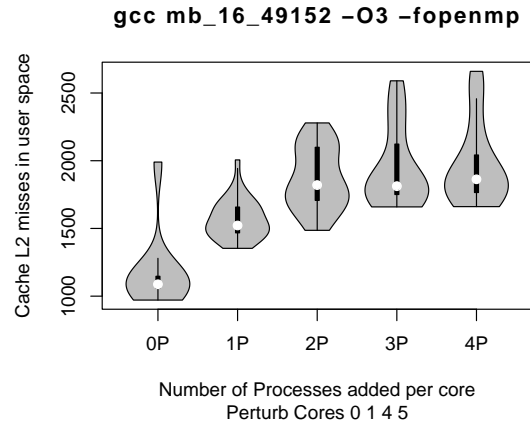
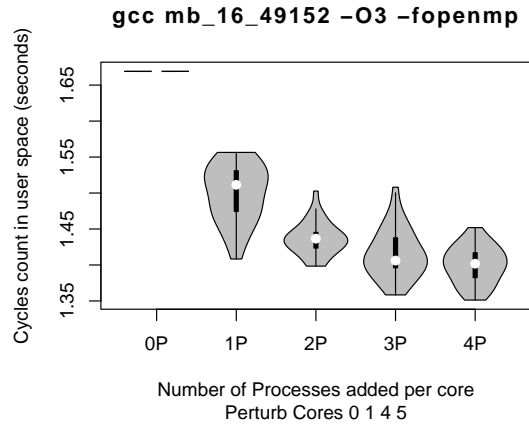
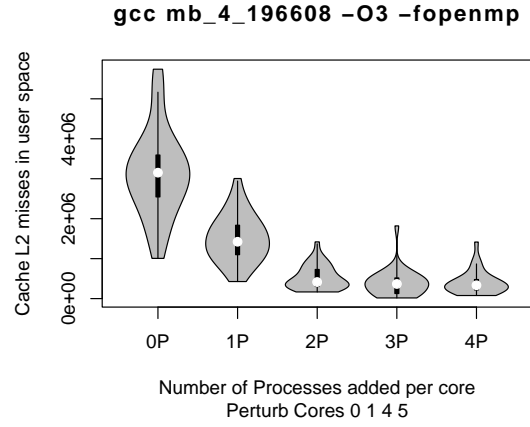
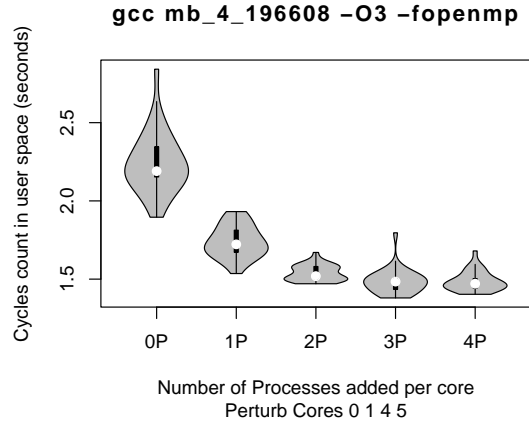
6.2.3 The impact of thread affinity on micro-benchmarks execution times

The aim of these experiments is to study the role played by the co-running processes on the decrease of program execution times at user level. To achieve this goal, we conducted our experiments following the experimental setup presented in Section 6.1 with some modifications at the runtime level.

- The micro-benchmarks are launched with 4 threads at runtime.
- Each micro-benchmark (4 threads) is run either alone as a single application on the machine (minimal system load) or in parallel with with 4, 8, 12 or 16 co-running processes (so we experiment five runtime configurations).
- We have also two scheduling affinity configurations:
 1. The micro-benchmarks threads and the co-running processes are launched on the system cores 0, 1, 4 and 5, where cores 0 and 4 share one L2 cache, similarly cores 1 and 5 share another L2 cache (see Figure. 1 in page 5).
 2. The micro-benchmarks threads and the co-running processes are launched on the system cores 0, 1, 2 and 3, where there is no sharing of L2 cache between these cores.
- The number of co-running processes running on each core varies from 0 to 4. If we add the thread of the micro-benchmark, then the number of running threads and processes on every core varies between 1 and 5. Since we use only 4 cores within 8 (see above), it means that the overall number of co-running processes on the system vary from 0 to 16. On every core, the co-running processes are launched with a fixed round-robin affinity on the experimented cores.

The main difference of this experiment against the last one presented in Section 6.2.2, appears in the way the threads of the benchmarks run. You should notice that in this experiment, the number of threads of the micro-benchmarks used at runtime is four. These threads are launched with a scheduling affinity to cores in two manners: 1) configuration where there are share of the L2 cache between the threads, and 2) configuration where there are no L2 cache sharing. To allow a comparison between the actual experiment and the last one (Section 6.2.2), threads must treat the same data size. To achieve this goal, we changed the N and M values of Listing 1 to run the micro-benchmarks with four threads. Thus, we keep the same data size accessed by each thread as in the case where micro-benchmarks were launched with eight threads. The new values taken by N are from 4 to 196608 and from 196608 to 4 for the M parameter in the micro-benchmarks code.

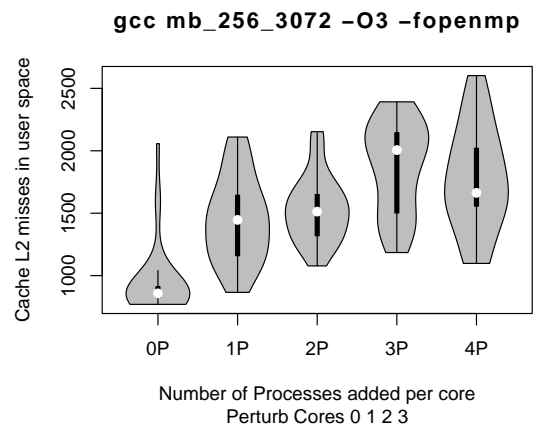
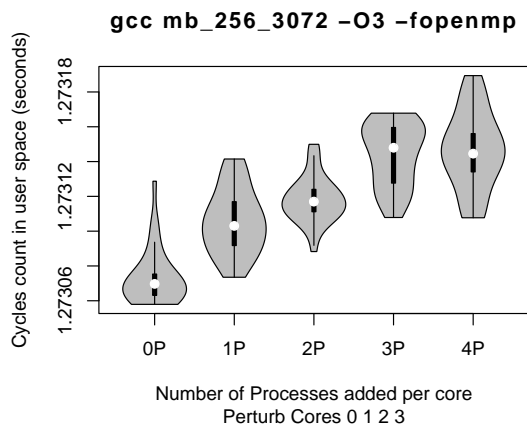
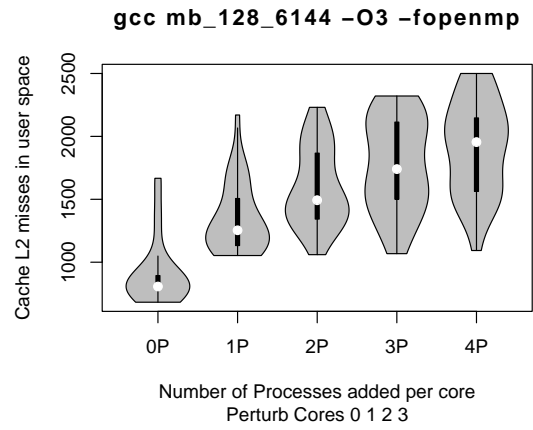
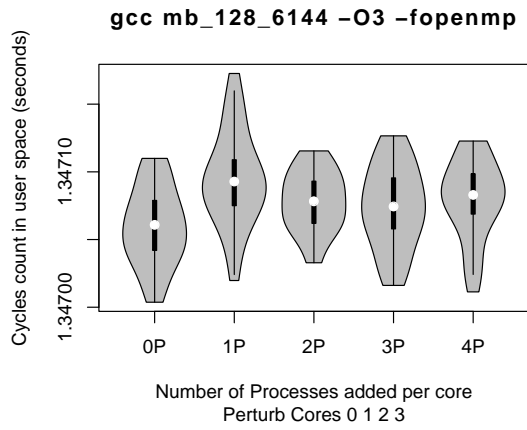
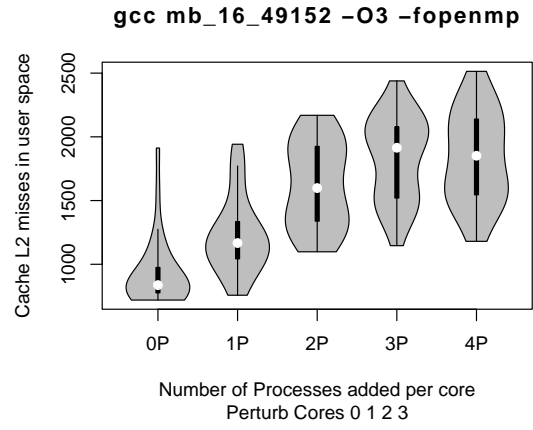
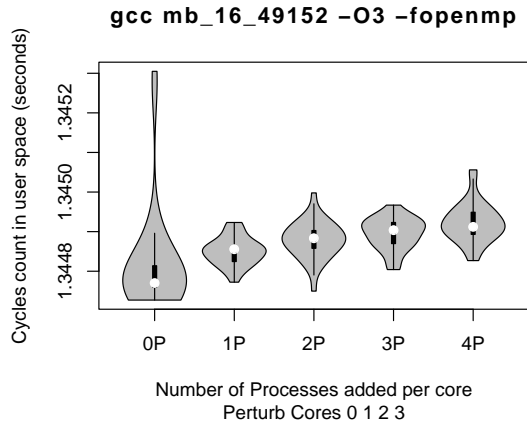
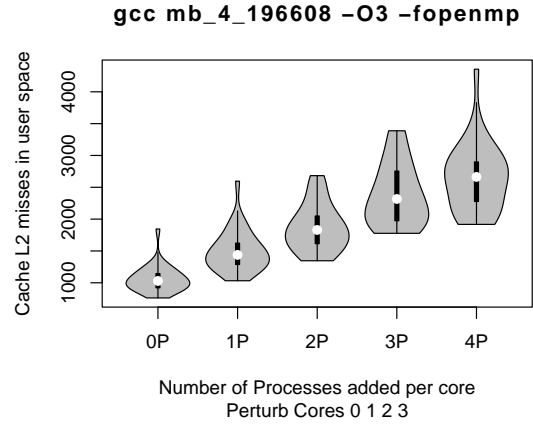
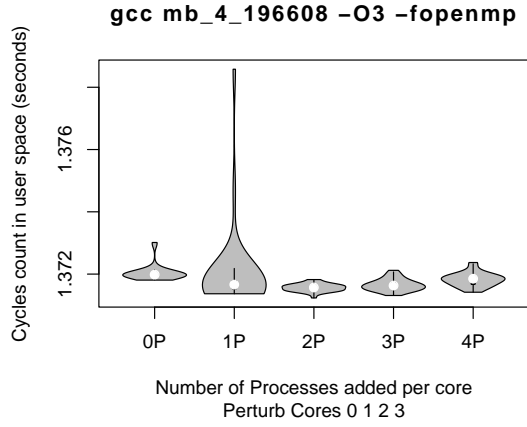
Figure 23 and Figure 25 illustrate the results when the micro-benchmarks threads and the co-running processes are binded to system cores 0, 1, 4 and 5 and to system cores 0, 1, 2 and 3 respectively. From Figure 23 we can see that program execution times at user level still decrease in the `mb_4.196608`, `mb_16.24576` and `mb_128.x6144` micro-benchmarks. We can also observe in Figure 23 that the execution times of `mb_256.3072` increase. We clearly observed the phenomena of program execution times decreasing when 1) each couple of the micro-benchmarks threads share an L2 cache and 2) the sum of the array



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Figure 23: Observed User Execution Times of some micro-benchmarks binded to the 0, 1, 4 and 5 cores

Figure 24: Observed L2 cache misses of some micro-benchmarks binded to the 0, 1, 4 and 5 cores



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Figure 25: Observed User Execution Times of some micro-benchmarks binded to the 0, 1, 2 and 3 cores

Figure 26: Observed L2 cache misses of some micro-benchmarks binded to the 0, 1, 2 and 3 cores

element sizes accessed by all the iterations of the innermost loop (the k loop) is greater than the size of the L1 which is not the case for the `mb_256_3072` micro-benchmarks (all the iterations of innermost loop access a contiguous memory with a size less than the L1 cache line).

Figure 25 shows results where there are not sharing of L2 cache between threads. The results are surprising, because except for `mb_4_196608` that has a negligible decrease in execution time, all other micro-benchmarks show a slight increase. We must remember that `mb_256_3072` and `mb_512_3072` micro-benchmarks have the same workload per thread, the difference between them is that the former does the computation with four threads, where the latter does it with eight threads. The results presented by Figure 23 and Figure 25 show that the scheduling affinity has an impact on how the parallel programs (OpenMP threads) interacts with other processes (the co-running processes). It confirms our intuition that when application thread is executed in parallel with a co-running process, then it is beneficial for user level execution time.

The next section explores two other factors that may influence the decreases of user level program execution times. We focus on the impact of using large memory pages and the impact of disabling the hardware automatic prefetcher on the performance variability.

6.3 Memory page size and hardware prefetcher impact on performance variability

We have shown that the co-running processes play a role in decreasing the execution times at user level for some benchmarks by smoothing the access to L2. A question arises: what is the origin of the high number of cache misses, while the working set of these micro-benchmarks fit in the L2 ? In order to answer this question we perform some experiments to check the relevance of our intuition (the high number of L2 cache misses is due either to the hardware automatic prefetcher or to using small pages or to a combined effect of the two). The results of the experiments when the hardware automatic prefetcher is disabled (see Figure 27) have shown that running the micro-benchmark `mb_4_196608` on the cores 0, 1, 4 and 5 has not affected the decreasing of program execution times in user level when we add co-running processes. This because the micro-benchmark still exhibits a high number of L2 cache misses (see Figure 28). The decrease in (median) user execution time is about 31% which is equivalent for the configuration where the micro-benchmark runs with hardware prefetcher enabled and using small pages (see Figure 23): on our test machine architecture, the size of small page is 4 KB and the size of a large page is 2 MB.

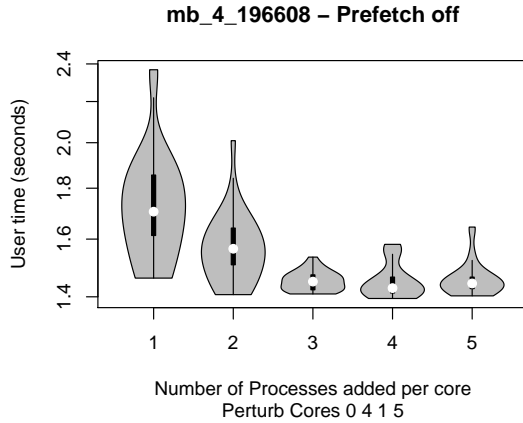


Figure 27: Observed user execution times for `mb_4_196608` running on the 0, 1, 4 and 5 cores with hardware prefetcher disabled

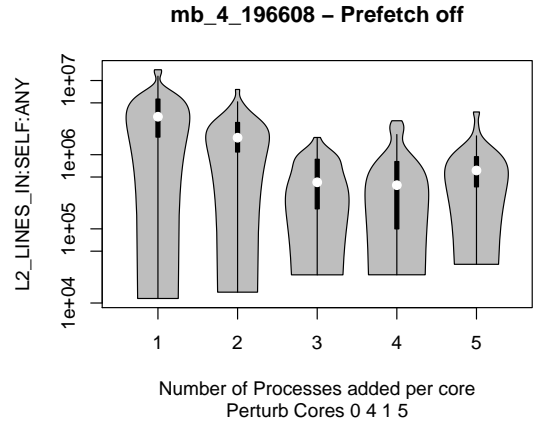


Figure 28: Observed L2 cache misses for `mb_4_196608` running on the 0, 1, 4 and 5 cores with hardware prefetcher disabled

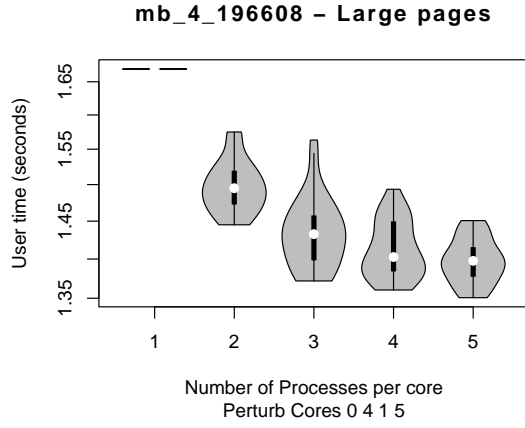


Figure 29: Observed user execution times for mb_4.196608 running on the 0, 1, 4 and 5 cores with large pages

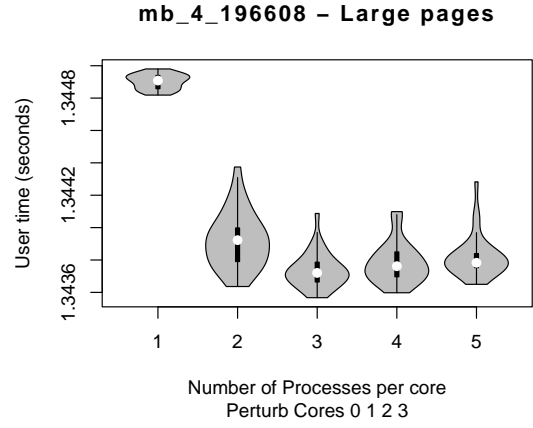


Figure 30: Observed user execution times for mb_4.196608 running on the 0, 1, 2 and 3 cores with large pages

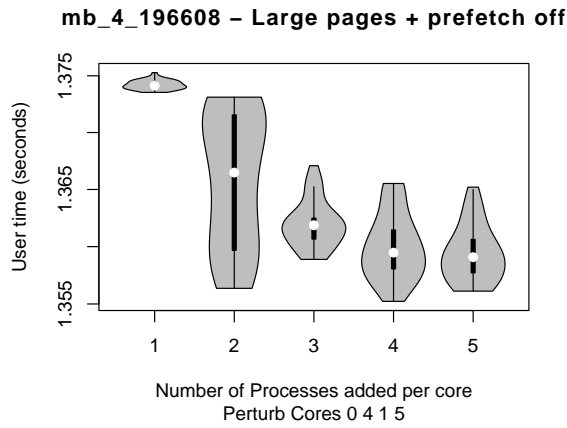


Figure 31: Observed user execution times for mb_4.196608 running on the 0, 1, 4 and 5 cores with large pages and hardware prefetcher disabled

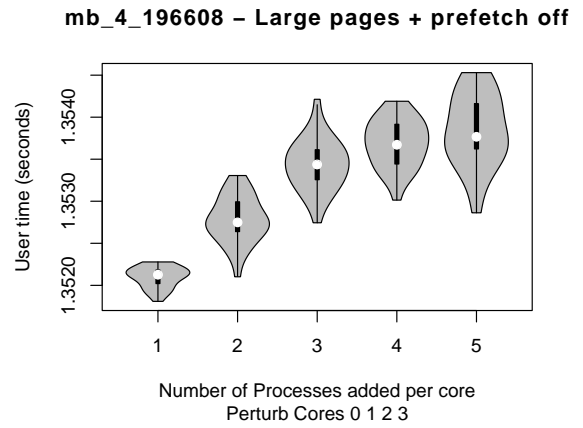


Figure 32: Observed user execution times for mb_4.196608 running on the 0, 1, 2 and 3 cores with large pages and hardware prefetcher disabled

Figure 29 shows program execution times at user level for the `mb_4_196608` micro-benchmark running on the 0, 1, 4 and 5 cores with large pages of size 2 MB. We can see that using large pages has a significant impact on the performances of `mb_4_196608`. Indeed, we observe a 25% performance improvement compared to the version with small pages. In addition, when we launch co-running processes in background, the program execution times at the user level decreases indicating that something is still going wrong. The last combination that we tried was using large pages and hardware prefetcher disabled together. Figure 31 shows the user execution times for `mb_4_196608`. The analysis of the figure leads us to the following observations:

1. Approximately 37% performance improvement against the basic runtime configuration (small pages and hardware prefetcher enabled);
2. Adding more co-running process in background lead to a negligible decrease in program execution times at user level $\approx 1\%$ (from 1,375 to 1,355 seconds).

The reason of this negligible impact of the co-running processes is due to using large pages and disabling the hardware prefetcher. In this runtime configuration `mb_4_196608` does not suffer from a significant number of L2 cache misses. Consequently, the influence of the co-running process to reduce the contention on L2 is no longer as beneficial as observed in the previous section. In the opposite side, the use of small pages and the hardware prefetcher has a negative impact on the performances of `mb_4_196608`. Indeed, using both of them lead to a significant number of L2 cache misses (conflict misses where useful cache lines are evicted) making this micro-benchmark behaving poorly. In that situation the co-running processes contribute to significantly reduce contention on L2, decreasing the program execution time at the user level.

6.4 CPU-bound micro-benchmarks

Listing 4: OpenMP primenumber code

```
int prime_number ( int n ) {
    int i, j, prime, total = 0;

    # pragma omp parallel shared (n) private (i,j,prime) reduction (+:total)
        # pragma omp for
        for ( i = 2; i <= n; i++ )
        {
            prime = 1;
            for ( j = 2; j < i; j++ )
            {
                if ( i % j == 0 )
                {
                    prime = 0;
                    break;
                }
            }
            total = total + prime;
        }
    return total;
}
```

In the previous sections, we presented performance data related to OpenMP applications intensively accessing the memory hierarchy (particularly the L2 cache). But what is the expected behaviour when the application has a low access rate to memory? Answering the latter question leads us to experiment running applications having less memory accesses. Listing 4 shows the code of `primenumber` application. As we can see from the listing, the code is CPU-bound (the memory access is limited to L1 data and

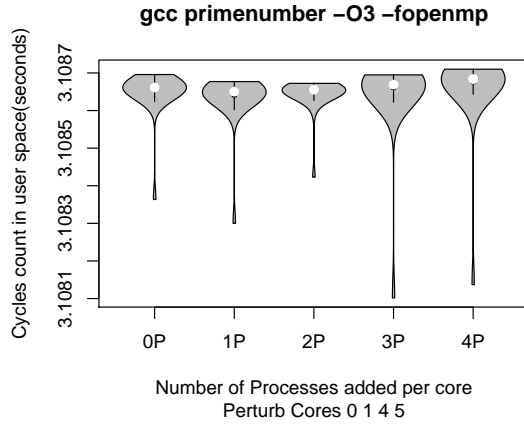


Figure 33: Observed User Execution Times for primenumber application running on the 0, 1, 4 and 5 cores

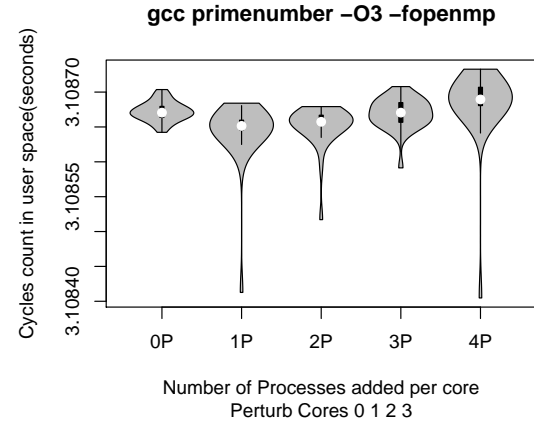


Figure 34: Observed User Execution Times for primenumber application running on the 0, 1, 2 and 3 cores

instruction caches).

The **primenumber** application is executed with 4 OpenMP threads. The application (4 threads) is run either alone as a single application on the machine (minimal system load) or in parallel with 4, 8, 12 or 16 co-running processes (so we experiment five runtime configurations). We have also two scheduling affinity configurations:

1. The application threads and the co-running processes are launched on the system cores 0, 1, 4 and 5, where cores 0 and 4 share one L2 cache, similarly cores 1 and 5 share another L2 cache.
2. The application threads and the co-running processes are launched on the system cores 0, 1, 2 and 3, where there is no sharing of L2 cache between these cores.

The number of co-running processes running on each core varies from 0 to 4. If we add the thread of the thread of the application, then the number of running threads and processes on every core varies between 1 and 5. Since we use only 4 cores within 8 (see above), it means that the overall number of co-running processes on the system vary from 0 to 16. On every core, the co-running processes are launched with a fixed round-robin affinity on the experimented cores.

Figures 33 and 34 show program execution times for **primenumber** application running on shared L2 caches (0,1,4,5 cores) and non shared ones (0,1,2,3 cores) respectively. The interesting observations from these experiments are:

1. Running the application on the two runtime affinities does not change user execution times.
2. The variability of user execution times for each violin plot on the figures is negligible (looking very carefully to the Y-axis).
3. Running the co-running processes affect only the whole (real) execution time. Indeed, the whole execution times increases when we add more co-running processes. This situation is expected since there are many processes in the system and they need some time to complete.

Till now, co-running processes were empty non terminating loops. The next section studies the behaviour of the micro-benchmarks when running with some modified versions of co-running processes. The co-running processes are of two kind : 1) processes having a varying amount of time spent in the **sleeping** state, and 2) processes intensively accessing L2 caches.

N	M	Benchmark	Chunk size = M*sizeof(int64)
4	196608	mb_4_196608	1.5 MB
4	190000	mb_4_190000	1.44 MB
4	100000	mb_4_100000	0.76 MB

Table 3: Values taken by N and M in the outermost and the innermost loops in the micro-benchmarks code

6.5 Variability of execution times under the influence of other co-running processes

The code of co-running processes used in previous sections was a non terminating loop with no data access. In order to be more confident in our analysis, we generated two other versions of the co-running processes. The aim of the following experiments is to analyse the access behaviour of the micro-benchmarks to shared resources (cores, L2 caches). Following the experimental setup introduced in Section 6.2.3, we tested three micro-benchmarks having the values of N and M presented in Table 3.

We have to notice that we kept the two runtime scenarios which are : 1) running all the threads in cores that do not share any L2 cache (cores 0,1,2,3) and 2) running all the threads in cores where there are sharing L2 caches (cores 0 and 4 share L2 and cores 1 and 5 share another L2). Details and results of the two experiments are presented in the following sections.

6.5.1 Controlling the co-running processes time spent in the sleeping state

In this experiment we have re-written the C code of the co-running process of Listing 2. The difference between the initial version and the modified version (Listing 5) of co-running processes is on how long they run. We mean by “how long they run”, the time spent by the processes in the running and sleeping states in the scheduling algorithm of the Linux kernel. Therefore, the time spent in these states may influence how the threads of the micro-benchmarks access to the shared resources which may disturb their execution times.

In this modified version of the co-running processes, we add a system call to the `usleep`⁴ function. We tried four values given as parameters to `usleep`: 10000, 1000, 100 and 10 micro seconds. These values highlight four different periods where the co-running processes are in the sleeping state. For larger values given to `usleep`, the co-running processes spend most of their slice time in the sleeping state⁵. At the opposite side, smaller `usleep` values mean that the co-running processes are effectively running during a larger fraction of their slice time. Listing 5 gives the code of the modified version of the co-running processes:

Listing 5: Background concurrent processes code

```

int stress () {
    while (1) {
        for (g = 0 ; g < 65536 ;g++)
            ;
        usleep(S);
    }
    return 0;
}

```

Figures 35 and 36 show program execution times for the benchmark `mb_4_196608` when his threads are launched in a shared L2 configuration. The X-axis represents the number of co-running processes

⁴The `usleep` suspend execution of the calling process for microseconds interval

⁵The regular time slice for the linux kernel here is 10 ms but this value may be changed dynamically by the OS kernel.

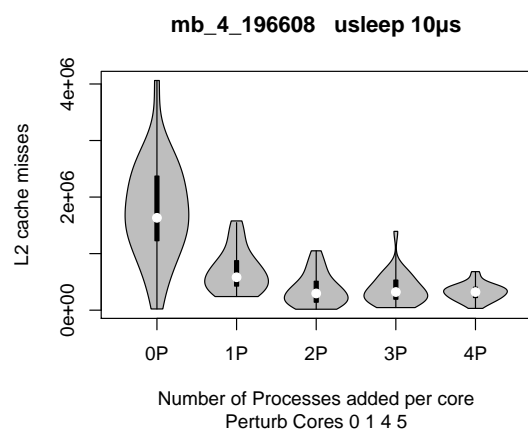
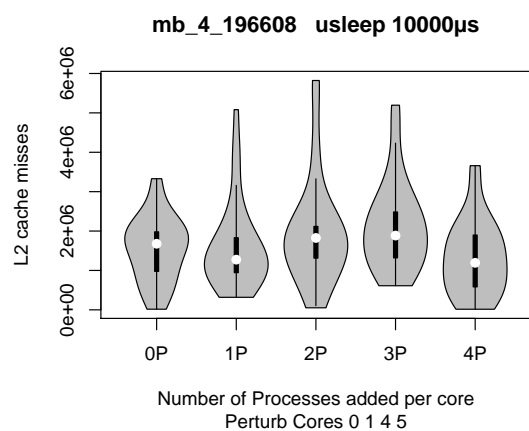
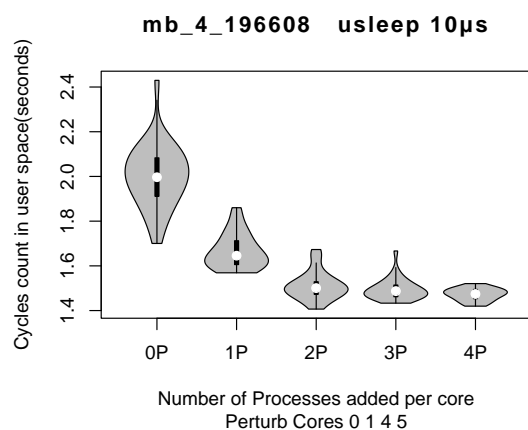
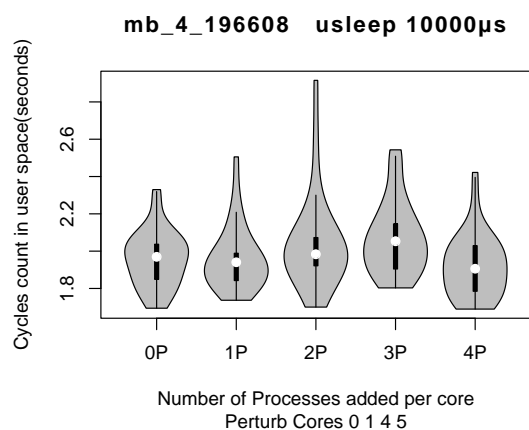


Figure 35: Observed User Execution Times for `mb_4_196608` with co-running concurrent processes calling `usleep` for 10ms

Figure 36: Observed User Execution Times for `mb_4_196608` with co-running concurrent processes calling `usleep` for 0.01ms

running in each core at the same time with the micro-benchmarks threads. We highlight two cases which represent the two extreme scenarios in the experiment:

1. The co-running processes calls the `usleep` system call for 10000 micro seconds (equivalent to 10 milliseconds);
2. The co-running processes calls the `usleep` system call for 10 micro seconds (equivalent to 0.01 milliseconds).

When the co-running processes call `usleep` for 10000 micro seconds, we can see clearly that the execution times do not decrease after adding the co-running processes. The benchmarks run approximately between 1.8 and 2.6 seconds whatever the number of co-running processes is. In addition, from Figure 35, we can see that the number of L2 cache misses are very similar in all the runs. This situation is not the same when the co-running processes call `usleep` for 10 micro seconds. In this scenario, the sleeping period is too short to let the micro-benchmarks running without disturbance. For this reason, we can observe clearly in Figure 36 that the user level program execution times decrease when we add more running co-running processes. The observation of execution times decrease for co-running processes having a short time sleeping period are very similar to those we have seen in the previous sections.

Analysing the figures of the current experiment strengthens our intuitions. We explained that the decrease in program execution times at the user level is due to the influence of the co-running processes in reducing the pressure on the caches. From one side, when they effectively run during a large fraction of their slice time (co-running processes calling `usleep` for 10 micro seconds), the probability that the threads of the micro-benchmarks try to access at the same time to the shared L2 caches decreases. This situation leads to decrease the L2 cache miss rate, leading in turn, user execution times to decrease. On the other side, when the co-running processes spend most of their time in the sleeping state (co-running processes calling `usleep` for 10 milliseconds), they do not interfere enough to play a role of a regulator. Thus, the micro-benchmarks threads run normally as if they were the only ones to run on the cores, leading to very close **median** user level execution times of the different configurations. But we have to notice that the variability in program execution times of each configuration is still significant.

The later conclusion cannot be given to any kind of co-running processes (those we have tested does not access to the L2 cache for example). The next section illustrate cases where the co-running processes access to the L2 cache. Thus, the behaviour of the micro-benchmarks becomes different.

6.5.2 The impact of accessing the L2 cache by the co-running processes on the micro-benchmarks performance

For this experiment we write another version of the co-running processes. Listing 6 shows the code of the new version.

Listing 6: Co-running processes code

```
int stress () {
    long i, M = 196608;
    long tab[M];

    for(i = 0 ; i < M; i++)
        tab[i] = 0;
    while (1) {
        for(i = 0 ; i < M; i++)
            tab[i]++;
    }
    return 0;
}
```

From listing 6, we see that the co-running processes now access to the L2 cache. The access to the L2 cache is highlighted by the declaration of and the access to an array of 196608 elements. This array fills

up 1.5 MB approximately in the L2 cache for each co-running process created in the system. Listing 6 shows also that all the elements of the array `tab` are accessed (read and write access).

Figure 37 reports program execution times at user level for the `mb_4_196608` micro-benchmark using four threads sharing two L2 caches. Contrary to the situation shown in the previous sections, Figure 37 does not show any decrease in program execution times at the user level. In contrary, we observe that the new version of the co-running processes influences differently the micro-benchmarks behaviour. In this configuration, we observe that:

1. The user level execution times tend to increase (looking to the **median** execution times of the runs).
2. There is a significant variability of the execution times of the micro-benchmarks at the user level. This is due to the perturbation effect induced by the co-running processes which pollute the L2 cache. We have to notice that this variability does not appears for real execution times.

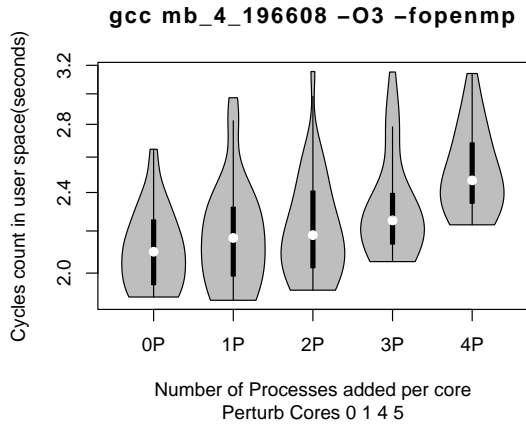


Figure 37: Observed User Execution Times for `mb_4_196608` binded to the 0, 1, 4 and 5 cores

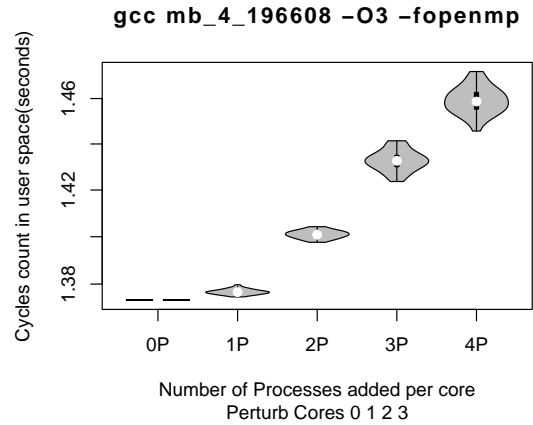


Figure 38: Observed User Execution Times for `mb_4_196608` binded to the 0, 1, 2 and 3 cores

Running the four threads of `mb_4_196608` on cores which does not share L2 cache also shows that the **median** user execution times slightly increases. Figure 38 reports the execution times in this software configuration. We observe too that the 31 execution times at user level of each software configuration do not exhibit a significant variability.

7 Related Research Activity

7.1 Variability of program execution times

Collective optimisation [7] is a valuable effort in the community of program optimisation aiming to log performance numbers in a central database. One of the main motivations behind this effort is the disparity of performance scores reported in the literature, and the difficulty in comparing, checking and reproducing them. A fraction of the non reproducibility of experimental code optimisation results comes from the variability of program execution times; if not correctly reported or evaluated, the overall reported speedups would have a low chance of being reproduced.

Another effort dealing with variability is the article of *raced profiles* [8]. That performance optimisation system is based on observing the execution times of code fractions (functions, and so on). The mean execution time of such code fraction is analysed thanks to the test of student, aiming to compute a confidence interval for the mean. We have two main differences with the previous work. First, we execute multiple times whole programs, not fractions of them. Consequently, our successive executions

are independent (this is not the case when we execute the same function multiple times inside the same program). Second, this previous article does not fix the data input of each code fraction: the variability of execution times when the data input varies cannot be analysed with the Student t-test. Simply because when data input varies, the execution time varies inherently based on the algorithmic complexity, and not on the structural hazard. In other words, observing distinct execution times when varying data input cannot be considered as hazard, but as an inherent reaction of the program under analysis.

Eeckhout et al. [9] study the impact of input data sets on program behaviour. They use statistical data analysis techniques cluster analysis to explore the workload space in microprocessors design. The final goal is to select a limited set of representative benchmark-input pairs that span the complete workload space. Alameldeen et al. [10] study time and space variability in architectural simulation studies of multi-threaded workloads. Time variability occurs when a workload exhibits different characteristics during different phases of a single run. Space variability occurs when two runs exhibit different performance characteristic. For instance, in our work we focus on the later definition of performance variability. Last, program execution times variability has been shown to lead to wrong conclusions if some execution environment parameters are not kept under control [2]. For instance, the experiments on sequential applications reported in [2] show that the size of Unix shell variables and the linking order of object codes both may influence the execution times.

7.2 Tools for performance measurement

A standard approach to achieve or study the performance of applications codes is to use performance measurement tools. **GNU Prof** [11] is a well known tool for timing measurement. It relies on time based sampling, it is not suitable for multi-threaded programs. **VTune** [12] is a commercial performance evaluation tool from Intel. Contrary to **GNU Prof**, it is based on event based sampling using hardware performance counters available on almost all high performance microprocessors. **OProfile** [13] is a free software relying on statistical sampling of hardware performance counters. **OProfile** and **VTune** suffer from the lack of counting measurement functionality and in some cases may need some privileged credentials to use them.

All the process of configuring and accessing the hardware performance counters have to be done in kernel mode (kernel mode privileges). Furthermore, the need to keep per-thread counting have lead to the development of kernel extensions to the operating system's context switch code to save and restore the counter registers. Thus, allowing user code to access the counters in a transparent way. For Linux, the two frequently used kernel extensions are **perfctr** [14] and **perfmon** [15]. **perfmon** aims to design and implement, on all major architectures, a standard Linux kernel interface (OS-dependent), to access the hardware performance counters of modern processors. The project also developed a user library, **libpfm**, and a tool, **pfmon** which we have used extensively in the context of our study. **PAPI** [16] is a library to access hardware performance counters. The aim of the project is to provide a standard and platform independent (OS and processor) API for accessing hardware performance counters across the variety of hardware architectures and operating systems.

8 Conclusion

This report shows clearly that, even if a machine has low overhead and the dynamic voltage scaling is inactive and the automatic hardware prefetcher is disabled, the execution times of OpenMP applications on multicore platforms may be very instable (variable). This implies to study a new performance criteria for code optimisation that was not important for sequential codes, which is performance stability. We showed that binding threads on cores removes the performance variability in most of the cases, but some applications have still instable performances after fixing the thread affinity. This means that other factors (distinct from thread binding) are still playing important role on performance variation.

Our report also highlights that executing separate co-running processes in parallel with the threads of an OpenMP application may be beneficial for the user level execution time (but not for the whole real time execution). Indeed, co-running processes may reduce the contention or competition between the threads on data that reside on shared cache levels: co-running processes push the threads of the OpenMP application to run with less concurrency, smoothing the conflicts on shared cache levels. While co-running processes are not beneficial for real execution times, they contribute to reduce the user level execution times, which means that the efficiency of the whole system is improved (fraction of time where the CPU really executes applications is improved).

The speedups that are reported in the literature are usually observed in ideal environments, in ideal experimental setups, after retaining *good* execution times. The end-user however may not observe the declared speedups, which may cause frustration. The reason is that end users do not work in ideal environments: they may not know what are the hidden factors that influence the performance stability of their codes, or simply they may not have a root (or enough rights) to the machine to fix it. Consequently, when an end-user executes an application that is declared optimised, he would have a very low chance to observe such performance improvements with the declared speedup.

Performance stability problems have been already noticed in the past for parallel applications on massively parallel supercomputers or on distributed systems. Since both fields are devoted to experts in computer science and engineering, execution times variability was not a high priority problem compared to other ones: indeed, in high performance computing, only maximal performances matter till now, since high scores allow to have highly ranked machines in TOP500.

The multicore era brings high performance computing to the general purpose market. By now, non experts will have to use small supercomputers, which are their desktop workstations. In this case, we think that performance variation becomes an important quality criteria for general purpose end users. We cannot rely on their expertise on performance tuning and analysis to deal with the problem, as what was the case in classical high performance computing. When execution times vary substantially, we have to make correct statistics to evaluate the execution speed improvements. We have already studied and implemented a rigorous statistical protocol for declaring fare speedups for the average and the median execution times. The tool is called *The Speedup-Test*, and is available in [4].

In a future work, we will study ways of reducing performance variations, hopefully without losing too much average or median execution times. We will focus on better strategies for thread binding on cores using affinity between threads.

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UFR des sciences	:	45 avenue des Etats Unis. 78035 Versailles cedex
IUT de Velizy et de Rambouillet	:	10-12 avenue de l'Europe. 78140 Vélizy.
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